Abstract: Socially, the United Methodist Church as a whole is a welcoming organization to all people. However, in some churches like Wesley United Methodist Church, the altar can be a barrier between a person in a wheelchair and a more personal relationship with God. This project focuses on the aspects of inclusiveness and accessibility in the United Methodist Church. A closer look is taken at Wesley Church and Foundation in Urbana, Illinois. Archival research, interviews, observation, and websites were used to research Wesley and the United Methodist Church. Overall, the United Methodist Church seems to have embraced people with disabilities, but individual churches may need to make improvements to make themselves completely accessible.

Short Assignment on
The document I chose for this assignment is the set of plans for the automatic doors at the Wesley Foundation/Church. The first page of the three page document is a form sent to Wesley by Tee Jay Central, Inc. to be filled out and returned upon the approval of the attached plans. The second page includes the door layout plan, the jamb mounted door switch, and the simplistic wiring diagram. The last page has a more detailed view of the doors, from both above the doors and in front of the doors. These plans are dated June 11, 2004. They were also archived at Wesley in 2004.

I chose this set of documents because I am currently attending services at Wesley United Methodist Church. I am interested in the history of the Wesley Foundation and Church. The building is handicap accessible, so I knew that somewhere I would be able to find information on when there were adjustments made to the building. The story of
how these doors came to be is actually a pretty interesting one, which is why I ultimately chose the plans for these doors instead of pictures of the installation of an elevator.

To more completely understand why these doors were installed, I talked to the Wesley campus minister, Rev. Rob Kirby. He told me about a student here at the University of Illinois named Tyler*. Tyler had a severe case of cerebral palsy and was in an electric wheelchair. About the only movement he had was the motion of his hand used to control the wheelchair. Tyler had been attending services at Wesley for about three or four years. He was a senior when he had the Foundation propose to the Property Committee a need for an electric door opener. With a little help, Tyler pushed the trustees to get the door openers on a “fast track” system rather than the usual two or three year wait so he could use them before he graduated. The doors were installed the month he graduated.
The cost of the project was relatively inexpensive: only a couple thousand dollars. The new elevator that was installed about a year later was in the $300,000 range. The electric door opener is also very reliable. There has only been a minor issue with the hinges being worn from being used so much. When the entrance is closed for repairs, it is only for a minimum amount of time. Because of the electric door opener system, Wesley is more wheelchair-friendly and handicap accessible.

The Wesley Foundation is associated with the University of Illinois, and they have a developed campus ministry program. Many students walk through the doors of Wesley on a regular basis, whether it’s for church services, Midweek services, the Etc. Coffeehouse, or just to hang out in the student lounge. The electric door opener helped to make the building even more accessible. Instead of waiting for someone to open the door for them, the disabled could push a button and get into the building. Ramps don’t do much if you can’t
physically open the door yourself.

Tyler was able to get into the building before the electric door opener, but it was a challenge without help. He would somehow get the door open, then race around to try to get in before the door closed again. This approach did not always work. He actually broke the glass in the door once. To protect Tyler from embarrassment, this story was not told to the students, or even to the trustees. Tyler was not the only disabled person that benefitted in the congregation. The new electric door opener helped many students and other members of the church.

The road to finding these plans is not a nice one. The University Archives have three boxes of papers related to the Wesley Foundation and Church. There were records dating back to 1902 and as recent as the mid-1990s. I thought that with so much information contained in multiple boxes that I would be able to easily find something related to the disabled. I spent more than three hours flipping
through page after page of bulletins, newspaper clippings, newsletters, and whatever random papers were archived. There was nothing related to helping the disabled. Not one article said anything about ramps being put in or elevators being installed. There weren’t any pictures of people in wheelchairs. In one of the boxes, however, there was a cross-reference page. There was still hope!

This smaller box contained materials from the late seventies/early eighties. This is the period of time when the first elevator was installed. I flipped through even more papers only to find nothing about accessibility issues or the installation of the elevator. I had contacted Rev. Rob earlier as to when the elevators were installed and he mentioned something about Wesley having their own archives. Because I could not find anything helpful in the University Archives, I headed over to Wesley to flip through more boxes of papers. The Wesley Archives boxes seemed to be a little more organized in the fact that they had more detailed descriptions of what
was in the boxes and folders. I was able to find the plans for the electric door opener and pictures of the installation of the newest elevator in less than twenty minutes.

After I found the documents, I talked to Rev. Rob to get more of a background story to the project. Going through all of the articles in both the Wesley and University Archives and talking to Rev. Rob about the accessibility issues at the church got me even more interested in those types of issues and how they are resolved. I am curious as to what all was done to make the building more accessible, when the changes were made, and if there was a specific person or reason as to why it was done. I knew about the doors, but I didn’t know the story of Tyler behind them. It also makes me wonder about the issues that still exist. I know that the altar is not wheelchair accessible and neither is the entrance directly to the Etc. Coffeehouse.

*name has been changed
Initial Question: What changes have been made to the Wesley Church and Foundation to accommodate the physically disabled and what prompted them to be made?

Before I came to the University of Illinois, I knew that I would be spending my Sunday mornings at Wesley United Methodist Church and Foundation. The first weekend I was there, I got a tour of the building and the topic of accessibility came up. The person giving the tour mentioned that the building is fully handicap accessible. At the time, I thought that it was interesting, but I really didn’t give it much thought. Because I am taking this class on disabilities, I have noticed the changes that made the building accessible. There are elevators, ramps, and even automatic doors. Seeing these improvements makes me wonder what all has been done to the building to open it up to everyone, regardless of their physical ability. I have seen people in wheelchairs in the building on many occasions, so I know that the facilities are used on a
regular basis. Not only do I want to know what changes were made, I want to know more about what *caused* these changes to be made.

Discussion in class also had an influence on my question. I didn’t really have any idea where I wanted my project to go until Tony mentioned that he wanted to do his project on fraternity housing. His idea of doing his project indirectly related to the university gave me the idea to branch out and do something with a registered student organization. Because I was able to expand my options and chose something that I am genuinely interested in, I think my question has a more personal touch to it. I believe my project will be easier to do if I am interested in what I’m researching and actually want to know the answer to my research question.

Reading *The Body Silent* and *No Pity* has helped me form this research question. *The Body Silent* made me think about paraplegics. I have to admit that before this class I thought of the physically disabled
as the stereotypical person in a wheelchair. I could picture them pushing themselves down the sidewalk to get to wherever they were going. I did not typically think about the disabled that don’t have the use of their arms. Even if there was a cut curb and a ramp to get to a door, it would be nearly impossible to actually get inside a building. Robert Murphy’s perspective on the disabled opened my mind to different kinds of disability and what changes should be made to accommodate their needs. *No Pity* helped to inspire the second part of my question. There was a lot of talk about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the book. I know that the ADA caused many architectural changes around the country. I wonder if the ADA had any influence on the changes made to the church and foundation building.

My research so far has been in the university archives and the archives at Wesley. The research I did at the university archives lead me to the Wesley archives. The object I used for an earlier assignment
was found at Wesley. This object also helped me to come to the second part of my research question. Upon talking to one of the ministers, I learned the story behind the automatic doors that were installed a few years ago. Knowing that there are automatic doors is one thing, but knowing why they are there is so much more interesting. I see myself doing more research in the Wesley archives and interviewing members and staff of the church to get the story behind the renovations. To answer the primary question, I will need to find out about all of the actual changes made to the building to make it more accessible. This will involve logistical information and possibly budget sources to see what kind of resources were needed and how much they cost. The secondary question will involve conducting interviews.

Looking forward to the research I expect to be doing for this project, I can see some potential barriers. Complete documentation for all of the changes made to the building may not be easily accessible. It
may be hard to find people to interview about all of the changes made to the building, depending on when the changes were made. I also may have unrealistic expectations for the answer to the second part of my question. There may not be stories to go along with the renovations. The story I already have could possibly be the only one relating to accessibility issues.


On page 57 of this book is a picture with the caption, “The Wesley Foundation at the University of Illinois, Watseka Lounge (1921).” It is a fairly small picture, but it shows a lounge in the building that is a few steps lower than the rest of the building. The significance of this picture is what is not there. Currently there is a ramp going down into this room. In this picture from 1921, there is no ramp; only stairs. This source gives some insight to what the building was like before accessible architectural changes were made. I do not currently have any other information regarding the ramp. However, this does give me reason to look for more information regarding its installation. There are no issues with credibility or bias because it is simply an old picture. There could have been no digital editing or anything of the like before it was published in this book.

Building Rehabilitation and Improvement Wesley Foundation Estimate, April 25, 1977, Renovation 1978 Building Use Committee 1975–1977, ‘Property Committee to be Added to’ Box, Wesley Foundation
This is an eight page document including an itemized list of what repairs needed to be completed at the Wesley Foundation with the costs of the repairs, architect’s notes on work to be done in the building, architect’s preliminary cost estimate, and the Wesley Foundation’s Program of Needs. This document helps to demonstrate the need and desire to make the building more accessible with the addition of an elevator and changes made to a bathroom. It shows how much it would cost to make these changes. Also, in the architect’s notes, he makes a point to include changes that need to be made to address the needs of the handicapped. This source confirms other sources by showing concerns related to the disabled and their accessibility in the building. I do not think there are any credibility or bias issues with this source: the architect that presented the notes and estimate was a hired professional.


This letter is basically a one-page thank you for pledging money for the renovation project at the Wesley United Methodist Church and Foundation. The most interesting and pertinent part of the letter is as follows, “All areas of our building are now usable in a way that was not possible before. The elevator to the Great Hall has been most appreciated by the people who otherwise were not able to use the stairs.” This source helps to answer my question as to why an elevator was put in—there was obviously a need for members of the congregation to access the Great Hall. The elevator was such a big deal that it was the only specific change mentioned in this thank you letter. This source
agrees with others that the elevator was needed and much appreciated after it was installed. I do not believe there are any credibility issues related to this object seeing as the letter was written by the pastor and more than likely sent to a large group of people.

Field Notes from Sunday, October 19, 2008. I kept track of the automatic door usage on a typical Sunday morning.

This source includes my notes taken when I was observing the usage of an automatic door installed a few years ago at the Wesley Foundation. The main part of this is a count of how many people used the set of doors and how many used the automatic side of the set of two doors. There are also notes about who used the automatic door. This helps to expand a bit on my question by going a step forward to show how the changes made to the building are being put to use. It turns out that the automatic doors are used a lot more than I expected: about half of the people using that set of doors used the automatic side. At the moment, I do not have any other sources that relate to this one, so I cannot compare it to another source. I do not believe that there is bias in this source, but since I was the one conducting this research, I am not quite at liberty to decide that.

Harold Barthel to Members of the Congregation of Wesley United Methodist Church, November 30, 1977, Renovation—Church 1978, ‘Property Committee to be Added to’ Box, Wesley Foundation Archives.

This is a three page letter sent out to the members of the Wesley congregation regarding the “Renovation of Wesley United Methodist Church and Foundation.” This document is divided into four
parts: a listing of renovation items with estimated costs, an explanation of each item in the listing and the rationale for its inclusion, a recommended division of the funding, and action for which the Administrative Board needs to take to forward the process. The most relevant part of this document is with regards to the installation of the elevator, “The elevator is needed to provide paraplegics as well as the elderly with access to the various levels. … While the provision is not enforced at present, the recent congressional requirement that universities and colleges provide access for paraplegics is probably an indicator of stiffer requirements in the future, so more than likely we can expect the local code also to be enforced in the future.” This document helps to show why some of the changes were made to the building. This does not complicate any other data from other sources, nor is it biased or not credible.


This source is a two page report submitted by the Building Use Committee to the Board of Trustees. Included in this report are details of why there need to be renovations made to the building and a request for money for various services from the Wesley Foundation Board of Trustees. The most interesting part of this document is as follows, “For example, some organization may have a special interest in help for paraplegic students and might provide grants for the effectuation of this part of the project.” This document gives some insight into why the elevator was included in the big renovation project. This source may complicate data gathered from other sources. For the most part, the other sources provide reason to believe that the elevator was installed simply to make the building more
accessible. This document, however, leads one to believe that maybe this was included in the project to help raise funds. There is no reason to believe there is any bias or problems with credibility in this source.

**Revised Question:** My original question was ‘what changes have been made to the Wesley Church and Foundation to accommodate the physically disabled and what prompted them to be made?’ Based on class discussion, I have come up with a new and improved question to drive my research: Are the disabled treated like a minority or do they receive ‘special accommodations’ at the Wesley Foundation and Church?

The main reason for the revision of my question is that my initial question did not seem to serve some greater good. The discussion we had in class made me realize that my research was not really getting me anywhere with regards to how what happens in Wesley Church and Foundation affects the rest of the disability community. Also, the disability community includes more than just the physically disabled, so I have decided to include the disabled
as a whole. Mason’s project specifically targeting the blind helped me to come to the conclusion that I should probably include a more diverse population in what I am studying. I am assuming that Wesley has efforts to be accommodating to all people, so expanding this part of my question should turn up more resources.

This new question seems like it is more applicable to the disabilities studies community instead of becoming a long list of boring facts. My initial question had a very evil twin that would have listed what renovations were done to accommodate the physically disabled, when they were done, and why they were done. My new question broadens the scope of the paper by addressing all forms of disability as opposed to just the physically handicapped. It also deals with the bigger issue of whether having a disability makes a person a minority or not. This issue is a major one in the disability community. My research in the Wesley Foundation will be able to contribute to the
discussion of minority v. disability by comparing what is done to reach out to minorities at the church and what is done to reach out to the disabled.

My research so far has led me to find out why some of the architectural changes have been made to the building. I have also seen that the changes have been useful to more than just the physically handicapped. I have not had the opportunity to interview any of the pastors yet, but I think that will be a very good source for my paper, especially for my revised question. It is difficult to see exactly what is done to bring more people into the church. Therefore, it is even more difficult to see what is done to target specific groups of people, if indeed the church does that. Talking to someone that deals with those issues should give me insight to these issues. It will also give me a perspective as to how the church views the disabled and how it views minorities. This could possibly lead to research of the United Methodist Church as a whole too see who it considers to be disabled and if that group is a
minority or a completely different category. However, that may be a tangent that I do not necessarily want to go off on.

Some of the research I have already done may not be as applicable to my project now with my revised question. The specific numbers for how much different renovations cost do not seem as relevant now as they did to my initial question. The letters I have saying that the elevator specifically helps ‘paraplegics and the elderly’ may point to the fact that the disabled are given ‘special accommodations’ instead of being considered a minority. Even thought it will not be the main point, I think my project can still have a focus on what has been done to help the disabled, so my previous research will not have gone to waste. With the information already collected, I can try to find similar information for what has been done to ‘help’ minorities in the church. Basically, right now I see my project as comparing what is done with the disabled and what is done with minorities at the
Wesley Foundation and Church to see if it is similar.

**Recommendations to Campus Honors Program:**

The United Methodist Church as a whole has a great set of values, social principles, and resolutions regarding disability. However, based on my findings, Wesley United Methodist Church and Foundation can make some improvements with regard to people with disabilities. First, Wesley needs to make itself more known in the community as handicap accessible and welcoming to those with all kinds of disabilities. People with disabilities may not know there is a faith community so interested in integrating the disabled into society. Second, Wesley should adopt a more active approach to accessibility. A lot of the building changes were made upon request of a person with disability. A more active approach may help to achieve the larger goal of advocacy that Rev. Kirby would like to see. Third, there is one major renovation that needs to be done. The altar is not accessible. The altar is a church symbol representing a place where someone can directly be in communion with God. Since someone in a wheelchair is not able to get to the altar, it make be seen as a wall separating the disabled from God. This tarnishes the image that the church is trying to protect: inclusiveness and equal rights for all.