

MINISTRY WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE LEARNING DISABILITIES

DEFINITION

The term learning disability is a broad one and embraces about 1 in 50 of the population, amounting to around 1.6 million people in the United Kingdom. A learning disability is a lifelong intellectual disability and embraces a very wide spectrum of people from those who have no apparent ability to understand others or to communicate with them, to those for whom communication flows relatively well but who struggle to relate to others and to organize their lives. Learning disability is often confused with learning difficulty but it is helpful if they are kept separate. Dyslexia, for example, is clearly a learning difficulty and affects about 10% of the population but it does not affect the intellect.

The breadth of the term learning disability brings with it many challenges. The term might suggest that people with learning disabilities have a great deal in common with one another. However, the way in which one person presents will often be wholly dissimilar from other people with the disability. This makes it extremely difficult for ministry groups working with people with learning disabilities to establish the right way of communicating. It is, in practice, as difficult to establish the appropriate intellectual level of a group of people with learning disabilities as it is of most other congregations.

PROSPECTS MINISTRY

Prospects Ministry has grown up over the past four decades and has sought to give opportunities to people with learning disabilities to find faith in Christ and to worship in an appropriate way. Its ministry has become most widely known through its involvement in a number of Christian festivals – notably Spring Harvest, Keswick and Word Alive – and today has more than 220 groups in churches where people with learning disabilities have a regular opportunity to worship together and to learn how Jesus can be their friend. More than 3,000 people with learning disabilities are involved in these groups, supported by about 1,500 volunteers. Prospects offers training, support and advice to churches that engage with this ministry.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO MINISTER WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE LEARNING DISABILITIES?

Historically the church has largely overlooked people with learning disabilities. They have been accepted within the church but have been expected, for the most part, to fit into a church that is designed for people who do not have such a disability. The church is a very word rich environment and most acts of Christian worship assume that the worshipper has a large vocabulary and an ability to listen to long prayers and much longer sermons. This suits (or has, at least, been assumed to suit!) the majority of people very well, but for those who struggle with language it is often seen as a hostile, exclusive and rejecting environment. Churches also tend to make the assumption that those who have the ability to read can do so quite quickly, but this would not be true for the majority of people with learning disabilities. It should not be a surprise that the proportion of people with learning disabilities who attend church is smaller than the proportion in society as a whole.

Many people reject the notion of any separation within the church, affirming that everyone belongs and has an equal right to belong to all its activities. The idea of separate activities for people with learning disabilities is, to such people, anathema. However, the church has long since discovered that truly inclusive life has to embrace exclusive activities. Creches and activities specifically designed for children and teenagers are part of the life of most sustainable multi-aged churches. The activities enable appropriate and focused activities and teaching for each group, and the church has slowly woken up to the fact that the same is true for people with learning disabilities. To expect someone with a minimal grasp of language to sit through a sermon is an act of gross insensitivity and unkindness. It cannot possibly be an edifying experience for them. Much thinking has been done recently into intergenerational worship and there are many creative ways in which people of different ages and abilities can be brought together for meaningful acts of worship. Such worship is an important expression of the life of the church as a body, however it needs to be complemented by activities which are sensitively tuned into the particular needs of the worshippers.

In recent years all the major Christian denominations have sought to respond to the needs of people with learning disabilities. The Church of England approved guidelines for parishes in 2009 but counselled against defining people by their intellect. To do so is “to use the medical model of disability which defines a person as a patient with a deficit.” The guidelines encourage ministers “to look rather to the social model of disability; a model which encourages us to recognize that people are disabled by society, as the context in which they live with any impairment of their physical or mental functions. ‘Nothing about us without us’ is the slogan of the social model.” In 1991 the Baptist Union Initiative helping people with learning disabilities was established (more commonly known as BUild). BUild produced resources suitable for people with learning disabilities and organized events to support churches in their ministry to people with learning disabilities. Other denominations have sought to encourage their churches to offer a more generous welcome to people with learning disabilities and often point to Prospects as the organization that is most qualified to help.

THE BIBLICAL MANDATE FOR MINISTERING WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE LEARNING DISABILITIES

- MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Our thinking has to begin with creation. Genesis chapter 1 verse 27 speaks of God creating mankind in his own image, thus firmly distinguishing mankind from the other animals that God created. The language of image is extraordinarily powerful and deeply surprising in the light of the fact that the Second Commandment expressly forbids the making of any image of the one true God. The Genesis passage suggests that mankind bears a special resemblance to God and we can clearly see that in mankind’s ability to enter into relationships, to communicate, to love, to be creative and to live with purpose.

The affirmation that human beings are made in the image of God is universal, that is to say it applies to every human being. Therefore, every single human life has significance and dignity, from the foetus in its mother’s womb to the frailest old person and from people in perfect health to those whose minds and bodies are shaped by disability. Everyone is made in God’s image and therefore it is the responsibility of us all to protect those who are weak and vulnerable. Ministry with people who have learning

disabilities is as important as the church's ministry amongst any other group of people, but the particular needs of people with learning disabilities requires that the church should be properly prepared and specifically equipped for such work.

- **FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE**

No psalm expresses the wonder of creation more eloquently than Psalm 139. The psalmist reflects on God's complete knowledge of human beings. He knows exactly what we are doing and thinking and it is impossible for us to go to a place where he is not. More than that, God knew us when we were still in our mother's wombs. The psalmist concludes that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made."

This psalm underscores the dignity of every human life. However disabled a person may be they are part of God's miraculous creation, and God knows them completely and affirms that they are wonderfully made. This insight clashes profoundly with the thinking of our society which puts on a pedestal a small number of people who are thought to be worthy of adulation because of their physical or mental attributes. The psalmist affirms that every person is on a pedestal in God's eyes.

- **THE INCARNATION**

The Old Testament affirms that humankind is incredibly special and this is brought into sharpest focus in the New Testament as God himself takes on human flesh in the person of Jesus. In Jesus, God shows his perfect love for humanity by becoming completely identified with the struggles and challenges of everyday life. The writer to the Hebrews was particularly concerned to emphasize the completeness of Jesus' experience of human life. He shared in our humanity even to the point of experiencing death itself (Hebrews 2.14) and his relationship with his Heavenly Father was such that "he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death" (Hebrews 5.7).

In Jesus the Messiah we meet God himself. In Isaiah 53.2-3 we read, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."

Jesus came into the world for all of humanity, but he showed a special sensitivity to the marginalized amongst whom the disabled figure prominently. It would be impossible to discern the precise illnesses of those who were healed by Jesus, but his absolute commitment to the weak, the victimized and the overlooked is clear. Followers of Jesus have a clear mandate to reach out to the disabled.

- **THE BODY OF CHRIST**

All the many images that the New Testament uses to describe the church affirm the importance of each individual member. But the picture of the body of Christ expresses this truth with particular clarity and graphic power. The metaphor of the body of Christ not only affirms the importance of all the individual members, but declares that the body is unable to function without them. Paul refers to the parts of the

body that seem to be weaker (1 Corinthians 12.22) and declares that they are “indispensable”. He affirms that there is no division in the body, each part of the body having equal concern for each other. “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.” (1 Corinthians 12.26) Paul’s conviction that unity occurs through diversity is inspiring to affirm but challenging to practice. There are no quick and easy ways to ensure that each individual (irrespective of ethnicity, age, gender, background, disability or education) is fully embraced within a local church, but the journey of listening and loving, sacrificial response is always life-giving and a fulfilment of Christ’s call.

The particular challenge that ministry with people with learning disabilities poses is that it is very easily overlooked. People with learning disabilities are, generally speaking, quiet and retiring and do not draw attention to themselves. They are very unlikely to stand up in a public meeting and articulate their views. This is exacerbated by the fact that many people keep a distance from people with learning disabilities because they feel threatened by them. They don’t know how to relate to someone who can’t conduct what they understand as a “normal adult conversation”. For these reasons, churches often tend to push people with learning disabilities to the margins of fellowship life – not necessarily because of a lack of love or compassion but because of a cocktail of ignorance, fear and awkwardness. The affirmation that everyone, including people with learning disabilities, is a crucial member of the body of Christ is an insight that most churches struggle to grasp.

The privilege of welcoming people with learning disabilities normally involves the additional privilege of welcoming their carer or the family member who supports them. There needs to be special sensitivity to their needs and a recognition of the gifts which they offer. Many carers will be tired and stressed by their responsibilities and the church needs to work creatively to respond to their needs. Additionally, some will have had the painful experience of being turned away by churches that were unwilling to accept the challenge of someone with learning disabilities. These are substantial challenges for any church to face but they are of fundamental importance as we seek to discover the wonder and the depth of living as the body of Christ.

The gifts of the Spirit are given to every member in order to build up the church. This means that a failure to welcome and receive the gifts that have been given to people with learning disabilities leads to the church’s failure to be what God intended. Creation, the Incarnation and the nature of the church demand that we welcome people with learning disabilities. This will not always be an easy path, but it is the only possible path for a church that is committed to being faithful to the Bible and to the generosity of Christ’s welcome.

SOME OF THE ISSUES THAT A LEARNING DISABILITY FRIENDLY CHURCH WILL NEED TO ADDRESS

- WELCOME

No one will question that it is right for every church to welcome people with learning disabilities. However, many people with learning disabilities will need special support and encouragement to attend in the first place. Without such help they will probably assume that the church would be an unfriendly and unwelcoming place. Churches therefore need to be intentional and creative in the way in which they

reach out to people with learning disabilities. In many places churches have been able to form strong relationships with local learning disability groups or residential care homes.

There are many issues that need to be explored by fellowships that are committed to being Learning Disability Friendly Churches. Let's explore some of them.

Buildings

Buildings say a great deal about the life of our churches, and enormous efforts have been made in recent years to ensure that churches are welcoming and accessible. This has been expensive of money and time and is to be commended. But the presence of an induction loop for people with hearing loss, a large print edition for people with failing sight and a slope for people in wheelchairs, is no guarantee that a church has really engaged with the demands of people with disabilities. The reality is that every disabled person has a unique set of needs and the most well-equipped church building will not necessarily enable them to participate fully in the life of the church.

To cite one specific example, many churches work on the assumption that people can read. It is impossible to know the exact number of illiterate people but one study has claimed that up to 8 million people in Britain are functionally illiterate, and that one in five are so poor at reading that they struggle to read a medicine label or use a chequebook. This observation doesn't mean that word signs around the church should be abandoned, but does mean that it would be wise to offer visual clues alongside the words. The challenge of words in services will be considered in the next section.

The ideal would be for every Welcome Team to include someone who can engage with disabled visitors. This would normally only necessitate a brief conversation but could make all the difference between the individual feeling welcome and overlooked. The church may not be specifically equipped to cope with a particular need, but creative thinking mixed with Christian love goes a long way!

Worship Services

There is no such thing as a perfect service that is accessible to everyone! People with learning disabilities encounter a myriad of challenges when they attend worship services and the church's responsibility is to recognize those challenges and to evolve strategies to overcome or at least mitigate them.

- Spoken Words

Most adults have a vocabulary of more than 20,000 words. When someone with a very limited vocabulary enters a word rich environment they are likely to be repelled. It is therefore very important that all services of worship seek to offer support to people with restricted vocabularies. This can be done by visual clues, by simple explanations, and by the deliberate use of simplified language. The Easy Read Version of the Bible has been found helpful in many churches. Signing can be a helpful support for some people and this can come in many different forms from those developed by British Sign Language to Makaton. The value of signing flows in many different directions for it is not only a blessing to those who understand it but also a visual reminder to the whole congregation that not everyone is equally able to hear and understand what is being spoken.

Preachers should always aim to be clear in their delivery, but this is particularly crucial for those members of the congregation who struggle to understand words. For those with a very small vocabulary it is clear that the sermon is an ineffective way of communicating Christian teaching. For such people it would be far more helpful for them to be able to gather in a smaller setting with someone who is able to communicate the teaching at an appropriate linguistic level. Prospects has produced a large amount of bible teaching material that is specially designed to be helpful to people with learning disabilities.

- Sung Words

The choice of songs and hymns is important. There is not normally any need to restrict the choice but the leader of worship needs to reflect on what has been chosen, and to offer helpful explanations for any words or concepts that some might find impenetrable. This is important advice for any congregation, but is particularly important where the congregation embraces people with learning disabilities. It can be very helpful to incorporate songs which have been specifically designed for people with learning disabilities, which are accompanied by simple reinforcing Makaton signs. Prospects has produced a large number of songs and these are available in written form and also on CD and DVD.

- Written Words

The widespread nature of illiteracy necessitates that every church should take account of it. This is an immense challenge because of the widespread use of notice sheets, books and powerpoint. The best way of helping a person who has difficulty reading is by a buddy system. There is no doubt that the majority of people will find written words accessible and so churches are bound to make extensive use of them. However, for those who cannot read there need to be carefully chosen people who can sensitively draw alongside them to offer whatever support is needed. For some it is helpful for the words of songs and hymns to be read out immediately before they are to be sung. At first this will feel stilted but experience shows that with minimal practice this can be done successfully.

- **LANGUAGE**

Through the last few decades our use of language in relation to people with disabilities has changed vastly. It is not many years since there were road signs saying "Cripples Crossing" and people were labelled spastics and mentally retarded. We wince at such language these days, and the fact that we do so is a welcome sign of the growing sensitivity of our society.

Language presents us with a continual challenge. Historically, most of the language that has been used in relation to people with disabilities has been patronizing. It has been focused on what we can do for them, and how we can include them in our world. It is wrong and unhelpful to assume the worst motives when words are used clumsily, but it is good that we should reflect carefully on the words that we use with the hope of achieving not only clarity but also dignity and grace. As we seek to improve our language we need to find more ways of expressing the mutuality of our relationship with people with learning disabilities. We all have much to receive as well as much to give.

- CARING FOR FAMILY AND CARERS

People with learning disabilities all need special support and this may be provided by their family or by trained support workers. It is, therefore, more than likely that when a person with a learning disability attends church, they will be accompanied by someone else. This person may well be a person of faith but often this will not be the case. This presents both challenges and exciting opportunities. The expertise of the carer will be of enormous importance as the church seeks to respond appropriately to the person with a learning disability. The church welcome team will need to engage with the carer and take the lead from them, especially on a first visit. The focus will inevitably and rightly be upon the person with a learning disability people to sit with the person with a learning disability who regularly attended the church. This allowed the mother, who was struggling to cope with her son's needs, to enter into the worship and life of the fellowship without being preoccupied with the needs of her son. Only a very attentive and organized church will spot such opportunities to offer support.

- HEALING

Followers of Jesus Christ are bound to take healing seriously. It was clearly a fundamental part of Jesus' daily ministry and he gave every encouragement to his disciples to believe that it would be central to their ministry too. Indeed, he declared, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14.12) Sooner or later every church will ask the question, "Does God heal people with learning disabilities?"

We need, first of all, to distinguish clearly between illness and disability. A learning disability is a life-long condition. Those with Down's Syndrome have three copies of chromosome 21 in every one of the millions of cells in their bodies. Their identity is totally bound up with this particular genetic fact. If they were to be released from the Syndrome they would be a fundamentally different person. No one has ever been healed from Down's Syndrome and, indeed, most people would find the language deeply offensive. They are the people whom God made them to be.

It is therefore inappropriate and unhelpful for people to pray with the expectation that people with learning disabilities will have that disability taken away. However, it is crucially important to pray for God's blessing in their lives and to expect that that blessing will take a wide variety of forms. For some, the blessing may be in the form of learning better strategies for coping with life and communicating with others. For others, it will be the blessing of receiving God's forgiveness for the past and hope for the future. For others, the blessing will take the form of their acceptance and affirmation by the church. All of these things may, properly, be seen as part of the wonder of God's healing but they fall short of the removal of their disability which would also involve the removal of their unique identity. It would, in fact, be no healing at all.

- BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES

Some people with learning disabilities are described as "living in their own world". For those who have no communication skills, they have no choice in the matter. They have no ability, or only a limited ability, to relate to any world other than their own. Their behaviours can therefore be very challenging for other

people. They may have an aggressive attitude and occasionally this can express itself in violence. It is understandable that a church would want to ensure the safety of its members, and will want to ensure that anyone who presents with challenging behaviour should be appropriately supervised. In one particular church a young man with a learning disability who had a tendency to act violently regularly attended church services. In order to ensure that both he and the congregation were safe the fellowship made a rota of people to look after him. The risk was realistically faced and mitigated and he was able to attend services regularly. This was demanding for the church but they gladly accepted the responsibility in order to ensure the young man was affirmed as a full and important member of the fellowship.

Instances of violent behaviour are uncommon. What is common is the tendency of people with learning disabilities to walk around during services, to make surprising noises and to ask questions which would normally be left for another occasion! One minister of a West London congregation speaks of a regular member of his congregation who would often, in the midst of his sermons, stand up and enquire whether she was being good! Churches respond to such challenges in a variety of ways. Some have no time for such behaviour and believe that people with learning disabilities should live by the normally accepted standards of behaviour. Unusual and disruptive noises have frequently been used as a pretext for asking people with learning disabilities not to attend church. The grotesque insensitivity of this is appalling, and shows a complete misunderstanding of the nature of the body of Christ. But not all churches are like this. In a church in Berkshire a member of the church with a learning disability made continual and unusual noises throughout the sermon. However, strikingly, the congregation was completely untroubled by his interruptions. He was known and loved by the fellowship, and was fully accepted along with his special noises. There is no stock answer to the way in which a church should respond to such situations but love, acceptance and affirmation must always guide us.

- THE BLESSINGS

It is absolutely right to point out the challenges which will be faced by churches who welcome people with learning disabilities. But it would be grossly misleading not to point out the incredible blessings that will always flow from such ministry. People with learning disabilities have a crucial place in the life of the church. They help us to focus on the most important things. To hear the struggled prayers of those with limited ability to speak is a humbling privilege. To see the smiles and infectious joy of those who have never spoken, helps to underscore what is really important in life and the true nature of Christian fellowship. And to work alongside those for whom communication is a struggle, forces those who are articulate to reflect more carefully on the words they use and the way they use them. The blessings are without number, and although the challenges are many and real, they should never entice a church into avoiding the wonder of sharing life with people with learning disabilities.