

'God smiles at me and he knows my name and that I am special to him' – Andrew

'I have learnt so much on my journey of disability, both in church and in the wider world that I wouldn't want it to be different in any way at all' – Sal

'There is such value, worth and gifting in being different and disabled people in an able-bodied world' – Emily

'The world sees us as broken, but we're perfect in our imperfectness, as humans, and as Children of God' – Laura

'Journeying with Jesus can be a long and winding road, if not a magical mystery tour. Wherever that journey takes me, I don't and never shall journey alone' – John

'I don't think God sees me as anymore of a flawed image than anyone else' – Mike

'I've realized that God loves me no matter what' – Anonymous

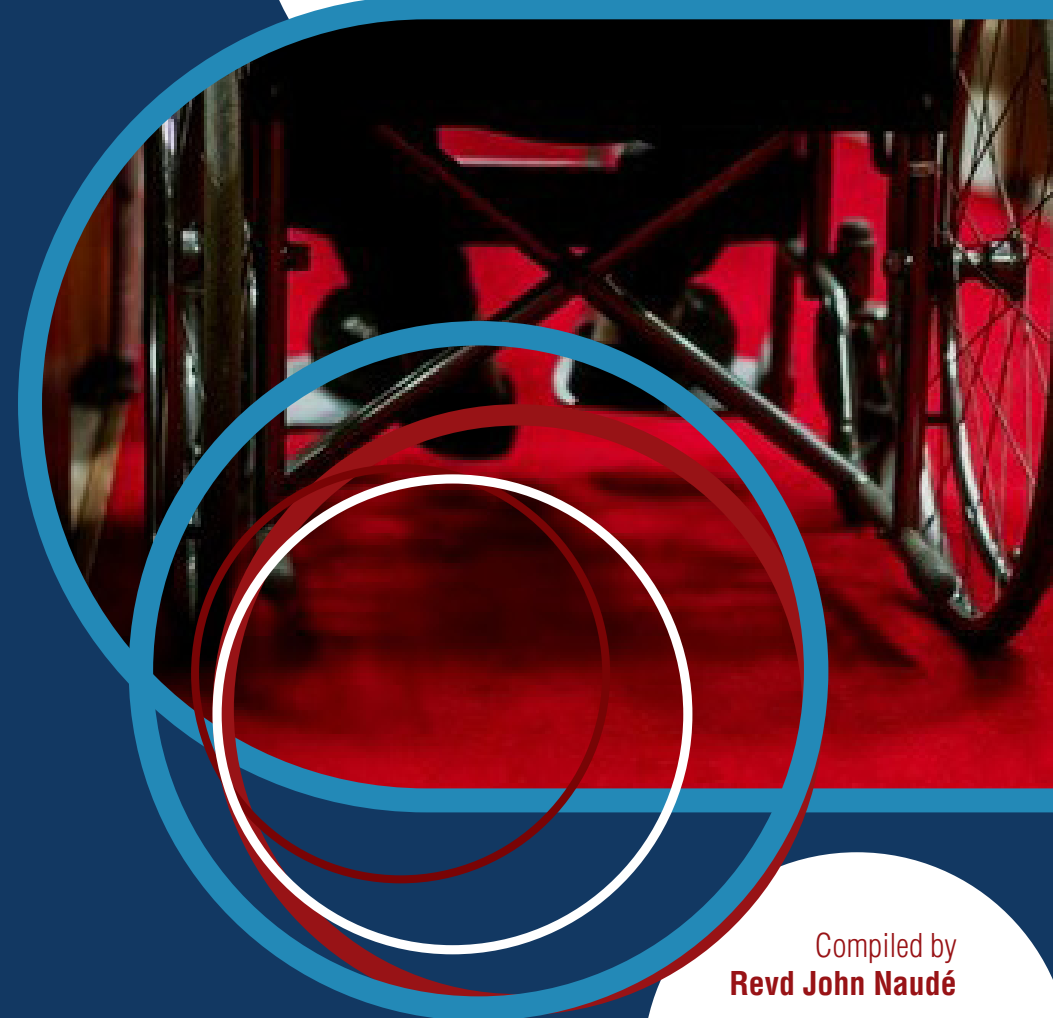
Rev John Naudé

John Naudé is a wheelchair user and been ordained in the Church of England for over 25 years. Prior to being ordained he was a disability adviser and trainer within the UK and parts of Europe. He is an adviser to the World Council of Churches disability group, (EDAN – Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network) and a member of the Committee for Ministry of and among Deaf and Disabled People (CMDDP) within the C of E. He is also an Author & Adviser to a number of Christian Organisation on Disability Issues. He is married with three adult children and loves to paint.

ALL STAND

The Gift of disabled people to the Church

VOICES FROM OUR CHURCH



Compiled by
Revd John Naudé

Foreword by the Most Reverend and Right Honourable Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

Each and every person, in all our glorious diversity, is made in the image of God. Each and every person has something to teach us about what God looks like and who God is. And yet the Church continues to leave out, under-appreciate, and sideline those who are at the heart of this message.

1 Corinthians 12:23 reminds us of the Church's calling: the parts that society treats as less honourable, 'we treat with special honour'. To be a church that is not just accessible to, but that welcomes, includes and honours disabled people, is to announce to the world what the Kingdom of God looks like. The body of Christ is not complete without all of God's children. When we fail to value our disabled brothers and sisters in Christ, we do profound harm – not just to them, but to the Church and its mission.

Change starts with listening to the experiences of people with lived experience of disability. This powerful collection of stories is an opportunity to do just that, and I am deeply grateful for those people who have contributed. But the work to be a Church that is fully inclusive of disabled people requires care, attention, and conversations at every level. Jesus saw, loved, and welcomed into community those who were disabled. It is long past time His Church did the same.



Justin Welby

Archbishop of Canterbury

Preface

'All Stand' initially makes us think of wheelchair users, although these are the stories of people with a wide range of disabilities each sharing their experience of God and the Church. Hearing the story of people's lives is a wonderful privilege. Hearing how individuals have experienced the Church and how they have experienced God as they have lived with disability has not just been powerful, but a strong reminder of what we may perceive as one way God seems to transform our perceptions into something totally different. This is demonstrated in that God loves, uses and blesses disabled people.

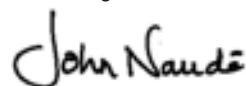
In the following thirteen wonderful stories, we read of people living with a wide range of different disabilities and how they feel the Church of England and God has viewed them. They each were asked questions based on the following four points.

- What has been your experience of the welcome you have received in church?
- Have you had any positive or negative experiences within the Church of England?
- What insights do you have in how you feel God sees your disability?
- Has your disability affected your understanding of God and the Christian message?

The interviews were based on the above questions but allowed to go in the direction that the interviewee desired. They led the conversation, and it was hard to reduce such experiences and wisdom down to roughly one thousand words.

It has been my real honour to have listened to the stories told and to have heard some common themes come out. I feel the greatest quality in the contributions is the participants' telling of the value that they felt they had as disabled people in God's eyes. It is my sadness that this sense of value is not always reflected in their experience of Church, but it is undoubtedly felt in how they view themselves as one of God's children.

My hope is, as you read their stories, you too will be moved not only to empathy, but also to greater advocacy for the ministry of and for disabled people.



Reverend John Naudé



ANDREW WATLING

St. Andrew's Church has been very good in the way they meet me and seem pleased to see me and it feels like a family. They make me feel happy, they smile at me, and they come and talk to me - it is like we are a long-lost family that come together. Lots of different people coming together and it feels like family. When I got confirmed, it made me feel like I am much more part of the Church now.

Reverend Guy left our church in September 2020, and we now have Reverend Liz since last September. She is lovely and has made me feel very welcome at church. I sit in the front row of the nave. From there, I like seeing the window and I like to be able to see all the people all the time. I am the big boss! St Andrew's is all right.

I like the hymns and the prayers. It's praying for your special friends and I feel God listens to me. I pray for my family and my dead parents. I have learnt to be very still and concentrate and hold my hands together when I pray. I like to sing lots and keep trying for the choir. I like "All Things Bright and Beautiful" and I like Christmas carols and my favourite is "Silent Night". On Remembrance Day I was singing and lots of people know me.

I tell the staff about the talks I've listened to. I love people and I welcome people and give out books. When I come to church it always makes me feel happy. In church I have learnt to help with the gardening.

After communion, I stand near the altar and just pray for the staff at my home and my family. I stand when I pray, and prayer is important to me. Jesus is

"I like the hymns and the prayers. It's praying for your special friends and I feel God listens to me."

always by my side. Jesus speaks to me, and I talk to him about people. I know Jesus listens and when he listens, he makes me feel good.

I feel happier when I am in church and that helps me when I leave. Then we go to the Chapter House, and I help with dishing out tea and coffee and biscuits and people come over and talk to me. It makes me feel very good being able to help other people. I like to help other people. My closest friends are back at the flats where I can talk to the staff, but they don't come to church. They are very caring because they listen to me. I also call Ruth who is in the choir.

I have been in the PCC for 10 years and it gives me a very good feeling and people listen to me and they make me feel welcome. I also like to chat to Chris who gives me jobs in the churchyard. (Rosemary said "I believe he brings an honesty and tells us as it is. Sometimes at PCC when it is lengthy, Andrew will say, 'Reverend let's get on!' ")

Sometimes I go on a pilgrimage to St Albans. I like historic church buildings. Some people walk but I go on the coach with our church family.

Every year I raise a lot of money for the country fair, where I sell books. This is done just outside the church, where I will stay for the whole day and meet lots of people. I like to meet people, lots of different people. The money goes towards St Andrew's and some other charities like Air Ambulance and Help for Heroes. Someone came and did a recording for local radio.

I feel that God smiles at me and that he knows my name and that I am special to him.

¹Rosemary, a churchwarden in Andrew's church was present throughout the interview. Andrew has Down's Syndrome; Rosemary knows him well and is a real support to him.





EMILY WILLIAMS

I live with generalised anxiety disorder and panic attacks and the welcome in church is probably one of the most important elements in my life. Now I'm healthy and well, I don't appear outwardly disabled, thanks

to a fantastic counsellor who taught me brilliant coping techniques that I've learned over the last 10 years. Also, thanks to modern medicine and two little tablets that I take every day and may well take every day for the rest of my life.

However, before this there have been times I have been really disabled by it. Both when I was poorly and now, the welcome will make or break whether you go in. If you're welcomed by someone that's friendly who says, "If you go and sit over there, that's where the service will take place and then afterwards this will happen", it really helps. You have a visual timetable in your head of what to expect, and it helps process what is going to happen. If someone is visibly disabled, then don't be afraid to ask "Is there anything I can do to help you? In my case, I'd say, "can I sit at the end of an aisle?" and this is a game changer to how comfortable I will feel.

My biggest example is when I wanted to be baptised. I was a bit older, and healthier but wasn't doing well. There was no way that I could have had my baptism on a Sunday at the front. It wasn't an option for me. I explained to my vicar that I wanted to be baptised, but I couldn't do it just like that. Incredibly, he boiled it down to be the real core important parts and we met in the middle. I invited close friends and blood family from the church, people I felt safe with, and I had my own little mini service that evening. The most powerful thing was the vicar saying "okay so how can we do it? Let's see how we can make it work".

Having a vicar going out of his/her way and investing in that person to protect their mental health, communicates their worth not only to the individual but also to the congregation. It communicates they are valued, accepted, understood, and cared for. That's powerful and you can't measure that.

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I became ill quite quickly; I went from one extreme to another and I was properly hacked off with God. Why would you let this happen? What have I done wrong? I was forced to learn a lot about myself. It was a real character-building time, leaving me with no choice but to turn to God, and it did my faith good, because you can take God for granted. Whereas when you've got nothing else, He is your only hope, the only thing to cling to, your only joy. There was real power and value in that, and I still remember that.

Interestingly, I never felt like I'd let God down or I wasn't good enough for God. I felt He was the only one that I could still go to, just as me. I felt I'd failed and disappointed everyone else and I wasn't good enough. But I could at least still go to God.

There is such value, worth and gifting in being different and disabled in an able-bodied world. You approach things differently, learn or teach differently, pray differently, and communicate this to churches: that disabled people don't need to be ministered to but ministered with. They are an integral part of your church family, and they contribute to it.

Since going through this journey with anxiety disorder, I have had incredible conversations and experiences with young girls with anxiety disorder, panic attacks, or depression. They've got big questions about God, life and identity. They feel able to come to me because of what I've been through, and I see God work through that. I'm not a theologian and I've no



idea if God intended me to go through that for this, but I do believe that He will use everything for his Kingdom. If I hadn't been through that who else would they have gone to? I believe I was given that gift from God to relate to those young women.

Equally, others with disabilities, and individuals with their own experiences, get written off as a hindrance or disadvantage. It's the complete opposite and you're missing out by not drawing on that, using it and learning from it.

I have giftings presently that God uses, because of that time. Maybe that time itself was a gift. Fruit came from it and continues to come from it. When I'm having a bad day and I can feel it in my chest, in the pit of my stomach, I wish more than anything that it would go the heck away and never come back. However, I wouldn't be me without what I've learned and gained from it. So maybe I wouldn't want it to go. I don't think I'd want my life without it.

I'm in a different position to a lot of people who are disabled. I don't consider myself disabled presently, but I was previously. I've got a different perspective on it because I wasn't disabled, then I was disabled and now I'm not again. There's a grey area because with mental health it goes up and down. When I'm tired, stressed, or anxious, it spikes, so it's something I will live with forever.

There is this toxic culture of 'you've got to be the best. You've got to be the most perfect'. This drive to perfectionism and able-bodiedness is so strong, yet we were designed to be in unison. We were designed to need someone; to accept help.

The phrase, perfectly imperfect, has become important, in this household. God meets you in your brokenness and uses your gifts. We're all imperfect but we're perfectly imperfect. It's okay to not be perfect. It's okay to be broken, and that's normal, there's real value in that and that's fine. Celebrate that imperfection.

FIONA GOSDEN

My disability is visible and I'm a wheelchair user. Most of the time I will walk with a crutch which is something else that's visible. My disability affects the movement of my hands and my grip. My hands are where I get most pain. It is actually the invisible parts of my disability that I struggle with most, which is the fatigue and the pain.

I think living with a disability is a lonely experience. You don't want to be patronised with 'well done' and people saying, 'you're amazing', 'you're so inspirational'.

"I believe that God sees disabilities as a strength and I understand that God doesn't like to see us suffer, but God sees what others don't see in us."

I find that sometimes there is a difference in the behaviour of other people when I walk with a crutch rather than being in my wheelchair. This is obviously entirely unintentional. People also talk to me more when I'm standing up. Some of this different behaviour is practical and I'm a short person, but I'm still more on their eye level, I'm still able to have a conversation. When you are sat down and when you are mingling in church and you just want to get to know people, it feels a bit socially odd to say to that person, 'would you mind coming to sit back down because I can't stand to talk to you'. So, it's socially quite challenging.

The positives to me are around prayer and a question of healing. The positives have been the people, where they have just ignored your disability, which may sound unexpected. So, when it comes to a time of prayer it's



simply 'let's have a time of prayer', and it's not something that's assumed you are wanting. I like it when people are not assuming I want prayer for my health, or that healing is a definite need. Sometimes people are hesitant to ask for prayer from me because they assume that I'm going through a lot; so they can't possibly share that their dog's gone to the vets.

I like it when people come to me for prayer. A challenging experience I've had is people being quite alarmed when they see my hands. They say, 'oh, we must pray for your hands' and that feels very intrusive and is very personal with negative assumptions. And also quite offensive.

It's so very important to only mention disability if it's relevant. I've been forward for prayer after a service, as have other people, and it's been assumed that I need prayer for my leg, but actually I've wanted prayer for something



completely different. But the attention kept going back to my leg and this person really wants to see my leg healed. Unless the disabled person asked for prayer for a particular part of that body, I don't think it is an appropriate way to pray for someone.

When I go to a church I would just like to be welcomed as everybody else is, and that, of course, assumes wheelchair access, the right language and attitude and not being approached in prayer time for something I haven't asked for.

I believe that God sees disabilities as a strength and I understand that God doesn't like to see us suffer, but God sees what others don't see in us. Disabled people live in this challenging world, where disabled people are disabled by our environment, and we have to have exceptional levels of determination, patience, perseverance, and security. It is important to feel secure in who we are.

Comparisons can be very quick, and I have to manage comparisons quickly and often. I also have to have a very positive relationship with my weakness, and I know that God gives me that. My strength does not come from me, I have an inner strength that I know is from God. God delights if people say, 'you are so inspirational', or say 'you are so amazing'. I can't take that without completely linking that to God's provision of strength. God sees my human weakness. I am weak and, as it says in Philippians, God's power is made perfect through human weakness.

Being disabled has told me that God has unlimited grace, and he has unlimited compassion. As a disabled person, I am daily going to God for more of this.

I'm not able to comprehend what my relationship with God would be like if I wasn't disabled, but I don't feel hard done by, or lacking because of my disability. I feel like I have a really special relationship with God. I truly believe that my disability is a gift and I wouldn't want that taken away.

I have very difficult days. The time when I'm at my weakest is when I have the most joy. This links directly to the Christian message. Yes, I look forward to not having the burden of this world, of this broken world. Disability can almost give me this hope. I am tired, I'm in pain, but this is not forever. It shifts my focus on to eternity, which is the Christian message.



GRAEME BLOOM

I became a wheelchair user in my early 20's. I also need to wear dark glasses since I live with Asperger's, and it affects me in many ways.

I grew up in London and moved to Bedford when I was five. I am now 38 and last year I was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease. This has been very difficult since it is a condition with no cure, and the hardest thing is not having family support. I have had to get used to a change in my life, with its ups and downs. With regard to the Church, it has tried to adapt, but if it hadn't been for me attending the ones I go to, they would not have made the current adaptations.

When I first wanted to go to church, I wanted somewhere where I could just go and worship without being approached, so I tried St Paul's Cathedral. I had never been before, and I was taken aback by the grandeur, ambience, music, and liturgy. Everything was done to a very high standard, and it took me a while to get used to it. Once I'd been going for a while, I found a home there. However, trying to connect with members of the congregation is challenging within a cathedral environment. You can only get that community feel if you stay for tea or coffee after the service, and St Paul's does not offer that.

In some way I felt called to St Paul's. I was born in London and St Paul's is a very iconic, long-standing building. I don't know what drew me there, but I wanted them to engage with me as a disabled person, since I had not seen a single disabled person amongst the congregation. I don't know the reason for this, but I know that St Paul's holds a yearly disability access day when the cathedral is free to disabled visitors.

When I returned to Bedford, St Albans Cathedral was closest, so I approached Richard Watson, the then sub-dean, to ask him if it was possible to do something at St Albans similar to what I was doing at St Paul's. After speaking to the precentor we came up with a plan, it works well, and we

have no problems.

When I am at St Albans I serve at the 9:30am service which is in the nave. I would prefer to serve at the Choral Eucharist but unfortunately it is at the high altar, which is not accessible. At St Paul's, Choral Eucharist is always celebrated under the dome which I love. After I had been there for a while, I tried to convince the precentor that as a wheelchair user there is no reason why I couldn't serve. Serving is a ministry, as is being a ministerial assistant administering the chalice. I kept badgering the precentor and I wouldn't give in, persisting and hoping for the best. Thankfully, one of the sacrists was leaving, and they were going to appoint another one, who would be responsible for the eucharistic ministers and the server.

In 2016 a new sacrist was appointed. I asked whether I could serve, and they agreed. We managed to work something out, it was just a case of being persistent.

Over 3 million pounds have been donated and invested in making St Paul's more accessible to disabled people, and I have been very involved in this project for the last three years. St Paul's was a very difficult place to access. The west end of the Cathedral had lots of stairs, so they had to have an alternative entrance for all disabled visitors. This was a ramp which wasn't fit for purpose. Improving access for disabled people was something they had always wanted to do when I started having discussions with the Canon Treasurer, several years ago. We now have a purpose-built ramp on the north side of the Cathedral, and we hope to open in spring this year. This is somewhat of an achievement for me, since I played a small part in getting this done.

I think there is still a long way to go to enable disabled people to partake within the Church, whether it be a parish church or a cathedral. I think that

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unless you have the mindset that you feel comfortable approaching a disabled person, we will continue to struggle to make the Church as inclusive and diverse as it should be. Also, as a disabled person, I feel that we need to work on making sure that what we say doesn't necessarily upset others or get misjudged in anyway.

With regards to sermons, sometimes they are difficult to understand for someone on the autistic spectrum like me. I also find it easier to be within a small group environment. Prayer groups and Bible study groups are much easier in a smaller parish church than in a cathedral environment.

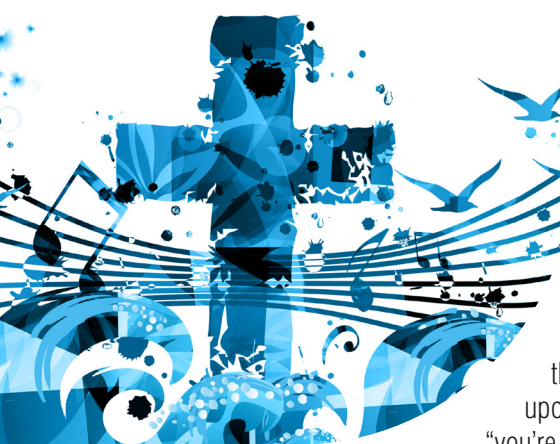
In one of the chapels at St Paul's, there is a picture called 'The Light of the World'. Christ is standing in the darkness at the door. Perhaps we should ask the question, "Does the darkness overshadow the light, or does the light overshadow the darkness?" I relate to that picture

because, as disabled people, there is darkness in our lives and living with my disability can be quite dark. However, I do find the light, and this is through the supernatural and the images of Christ. For me an image or icon is more powerful than what I hear or read.

I would further say that it's not all negative and my involvement in the Cathedral has been quite positive. I focus on those positives instead of the negatives. However, there are occasions when I'm frowned upon because people are thinking,

"you're in a wheelchair", or "you wear dark glasses". People don't necessarily understand

the reasons for this. We need to be less judgmental as a society and give thanks for people who minister within our church environment. Sometimes if you have a disability you are seen as a second-class citizen, and this should not be the case. I thank God that I have my faith and I realise that for non-Christians it can be challenging. I'm a strong believer that the impossible is possible, and it's a case of engaging with those with different types of disabilities and making sure that they feel as welcome as possible.



GRAHAM KERSHAW

I have been deaf from birth. When I was born, they said to my mother that they didn't know why I was deaf, but it was linked to something in my blood.



When I was 2, I went to Odsal House school for the deaf in Bradford as a day pupil, and I left at the age of 16. It focused on the spoken language, so I could only access some of it and missed out on a lot. As a result, my speech isn't good, and neither is my reading. Since my lip reading isn't great, they should have taught me through sign language.

"I have had priests visiting me, and they haven't always brought an interpreter which makes communication really difficult."

I learnt to sign in secret at the back of the bike shed with my deaf friends at the age of 6 or 7, since it wasn't allowed in school. If the teachers caught me, they would use a stick on my hand. However, when we went to the Deaf Club where there were adults, we could access full British Sign Language (BSL). My daughter and son sign but their partners can't, so they use gestures and I pick up bits and pieces. My grandchildren sign a little bit too. I have been involved with the Deaf Club, but I am now more involved with the deaf church groups. I think they are very different. The people in

the deaf church groups are very calm and want to learn, whereas in the Deaf Club there is a lot of backstabbing and criticising. Recently I have returned to the Deaf Centre. It has been okay, because I have decided to be more 'thick skinned' and rely on God being with me.

I remember being frustrated because I wanted to understand things that I had read, but there was no one I could ask. There might have been an interpreter, but not somebody who would sign directly to you and explain things. I prayed to God at one point, saying "I need somebody who I can communicate with

and learn from, because I am lost here". There are deaf people involved in the Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses, who have church interpreters. I didn't have this.

I wanted to be saved, I wanted that connection with God for myself, but I didn't know how that happened. I had some people saying that my deafness was God punishing me, but I thought that wasn't right. It was confusing, I had been taught that I hadn't lived a bad life and that God was watching - but who was God? I didn't have anyone to answer these questions. In my heart I just felt that the connection with God was important, but how was that to happen? How would I find that path to God? How would I get there?



I prayed to God, I told Him that I was lost and couldn't access things and I felt He was ignoring me because I was born deaf. God are you just ignoring us? Do you not care about us? Is church not for us? I was very frustrated. I had been away from church for a couple of years when a friend's mother passed. At the service I saw a priest who was signing. I told my wife and wondered whether someone in his family was deaf. I was nervous about talking to the family, maybe they would think that I had been bad in my past? The priest, Bob Shrine, invited me over and explained things to me. I had finally found somebody who could explain the Bible to me.

I could learn, I was hungry for this, and he could feed me, and I could ask him questions. I learnt so much and I realised that when I had been talking to God, He had been listening to me. God was there by my side, and He had put Bob in my path.

I think it is disappointing that not many priests can understand sign language. With the Deaf Group, we are always looking for an interpreter which is not always possible. I have had priests visiting me, and they haven't always

brought an interpreter which makes communication really difficult. However, I think things have improved over time. Nowadays many people book interpreters for weddings, funerals, and baptisms.

Several deaf people have become Mormons or Jehovah Witnesses because they can access their services. In my case I had a connection with a Christian church beforehand, but for others it has been too late, so they have joined the other groups. Furthermore, there is no chaplain provision in the Church of England churches.

We have had opportunities to get together to run things differently. We have been able to get involved in drama groups, Bible studies and readings where we take part on a Sunday, which has been very positive. These teams however have been very informal, with little effort made, so they only happen from time to time. I have done Bible readings occasionally, but this has been difficult with COVID, and we have not been able to practice beforehand. It's good to practice things in advance because it means that deaf people have been able to lead the services. It's very different where it is all deaf people, I can have a smooth conversation which isn't staggered and that is valued.

I think that when people do a theology course or priests do their training, disability and deaf awareness should be part of this. They should be involved with people with different disabilities and deafness. This would help them understand what Deaf Church is and they would become used to this interaction without being nervous about it. Often, you have to start from scratch. They come along for the Deaf Awareness training and it's about teaching them again those first few signs.

At Christchurch, Halifax, there is a monthly service for deaf and hearing people once a month and the deaf people are involved. In the evenings, there is a deaf led service with the joint service led in BSL. On Sunday mornings there are about 6-8 deaf people, but in the evenings, we may get around 20. In the summer and spring, more people come because it's lighter and they have to travel to find a church where their deafness is accepted, and they can be part of a community where they belong. There's a church just around the corner from me, but there are no other deaf people there, and no interpreters, and I cannot communicate. It is a Church of England Church but since in Halifax they have interpreters, they have what I need.



JOHN BENTLEY

I became a Christian at 16 through the youth group at my local Anglican church. I have remained an Anglican since then, with the occasional foray into the Pentecostal byways. I met my (now) wife at our youth group when I was 16; we later attended the same university and got married in her second year. That was 48 years ago. I used to work for the NHS, and my wife is a (retired) Anglican priest. The Church has long been part of my journey.

On April 1st, 2017, I had a brain haemorrhage during the night. April Fool's Day. How could I forget? I was taken to hospital and needed urgent and complicated surgery and spent 10 days in critical care, coming home without half my sight. I remember being told that I would never be able to drive again. This was a shock because I loved driving and drove a lot. I happened to be in hospital over Easter, so I attended the Easter services in the chapel. It was a very different experience reflecting on the theory of pain, death, and resurrection, and having something of a living experience of that. Resurrection would be different for me. My life since 1st April 2017 has been very different. Not worse. Not better. Just decidedly different. Look at life through my eyes. I am not totally blind. I have some peripheral vision, but I can't see anything to my left. I also find depth and distance perception challenging. As an added consequence of impaired vision, I have very little sense of place and get easily lost. When I go to church, I find it difficult if there is clutter on the floor, an unfamiliar layout, tiny print in books and yet another variant on pew design. It's great that children attend church, I wouldn't stop that for a second, but I don't see somebody little and quick, particularly coming in from the left side. Standing on a child is frowned upon! A paradox - the familiarity of liturgy and the mystery of place.

I think it would be wonderful to be cured, but I can be healed without being cured. I would argue that the Church can benefit from those that are not cured because we bring a deeper understanding of healing, and we can still have the fervency and passion of anger. If I go to a church and Lesley (my wife)

asks, "Have you got a large print version?", and they say, "Well yes, I'm sure we have somewhere" – it is irritating that it is not readily available, and I think "Do you not know how many people can't read half of what you put out?"

I experience healing daily. That doesn't mean that when I walk into a street sign it doesn't hurt or upset me.

I think people are generally welcoming and helpful. They will say "Yes, we have large print versions", "How can we help?", "Where is the best place for you to sit?", "For communion would you like someone to come down and guide you?". I was in town the other week trying to find Screwfix, and a fella walking towards me was really kind and gentle. He recognized the significance of the white stick and explored what help I needed and how best to give it. It's about having a helpful and collaborative attitude. I am not a complete waste of space – I simply can't see where the space is I could sit in and need some assistance to find it.

A few weeks ago, I was reading in Mark 8 about Jesus healing a blind man. Jesus said, "what can you see?" and the man replied, "I see people like trees". Even Jesus found healing complicated at times. "Come back, and I'll have another go". This fed my thinking on the similarity and difference between curing and healing. It's not always as straightforward as it might first appear. There's more to life than being cured. Jesus sheds a tear as I have and will continue to do. I'm also optimistic that He has a similar sense of humour. When I apologized for nearly bumping into the poor old fella coming towards me in the M&S toilets, He was looking down and saying, "You know you're a soft lad at times, that's your own reflection in a full-length mirror..."

Some people with a disability can feel that, in God's eyes, they are a mistake or a failure. It's a poorly thought-out view but it's an easy one to come to. "If only my faith were bigger, I'd prayed harder, or the Polish Priest had said another couple of Hail Mary's, then God would have listened. He's an awfully

"I think it would be wonderful to be cured, but I can be healed without being cured."

busy God you know. He would have listened and fixed me". I think that's a simplistic and a naive view. I don't say that with my disability I am stronger mentally, physically or spiritually. Also please don't say I'm an inspiration. Don't tell me I'm brave. It's not the point. This is where I am on my journey with the Lord, and I do not walk alone. He walks with me, He guides me. I have no evil to fear.

Has my disability taught me anything new about the Christian message? The Truths are the same, but the perspective is different. 'Tho' I walk through the valley of the shadow' is now less of an intellectual exercise. Been there. Got sent back. At least most of me did. If we all have sinned and fallen short, then I'm not greatly different from anybody else who walks through the church door or walks up to the door, turns around and goes away.

Groucho Marx said, "I wouldn't want to be a member of any club that would have me!". The Church is not a club, but it is a place where the halt, the lame, the elderly, the young, the distressed and the lost are welcome. Walking with Jesus can be a long and winding road, if not a magical mystery tour. Wherever that journey takes me I don't, and never shall, walk alone.

We can help or hinder the journey of our brothers and sisters. May God grant us the sensitivity and insight to do the former, not the latter.

KATE BELCHER

I was a non-stipendiary deacon, and seven weeks before my ordination, I had a road accident. I was on my bike and a pedestrian crossed in front of me, causing me to crash into the back of a parked car. I was concussed for about two and a half hours, but I hadn't broken anything. I did have a headache a mile wide, and it took four or five weeks to get over the worst of it.



Since ordination was approaching and nobody realised quite how bad I was, I went to the ordination retreat. I had said to the director that I still wasn't well after the accident, but he asked me to go along and do what I could. The thing is, you look the same and you sound the same. I was walking with a stick, but no-one said, "Are you fit to be ordained?" Frankly, I don't think I was. Then over the next two years it emerged that I had an untreated brain injury which was basically making me "as daft as a brush!" But by then I was already ordained a priest. A friend described me as "the same old Kate, but fuzzy round the edges!"

One of the problems I have is my memory. When my curacy was coming to an end, I went to the bishop and said I was still not feeling 100 percent. I therefore stayed in my curate's post for five years and then I was moved on. I feel that my experience of disability has informed my ministry. I could really understand where the older people who struggle are coming from, when they would say "Oh I can't help you out by reading the prayers today, Kate, I'm just not feeling up to it". So, there was that on a very practical level, and I made much more of a point of keeping in touch with them. I hope they would say so too.

For years I had felt called to set up a Bible study group for people with learning disabilities.

Someone said to me "well you will have to pray about it, pray that God's putting the right people in the right place at the right time", so I did. I prayed and prayed for 16 years, having a reminder in my notebook. I had left teaching to be ordained, and I became a volunteer with the local Downs

“The Archdeacon had told me not to tell people about the accident because they would feel sorry for me and think they had to look after me. Yet it was affecting me, and it still does.”

Syndrome Group. One of the families with a 14-year-old son had invited me to his baptism. It was a lovely occasion. Some weeks later, they called to explain that there was no provision for people with special needs in the diocese for confirmation training, and they wanted me to be involved in setting up something for their son and others. It was a wonderful group called ‘Special Me’, that ran every other Saturday for five years. It was sad when it finished but it had been wonderful, filling a need, and bringing some of the participants to faith.

The archdeacon had told me not to tell people about the accident because they would feel sorry for me and think they had to look after me. Yet it was affecting me, and it still does. People would come up to me and ask about the accident. I thought “Why am I lying to these people?” So, I would say that I had been in a serious accident, I had a poor memory, was a bit fluffy, and couldn’t remember the words. By this time, they had all got to know me.

I think my experience brings a greater humanity to my ministry. I not only had to make allowances for myself but for others.

Weakness is not something we like to promote or acknowledge but that’s not good. I think we all have our failings. Mine is invisible unless I refer to my brain injury. They know about my poor memory, that I always have a book in front of me but usually it’s just “Kate fluffs her lines all the time!” I hope that people can see that I am a real person, that I am not so high above them that I can’t offer them anything. It sounds awfully pious; but someone who offered them a good example.

After the accident that feeling of Jesus walking alongside you with His arm around your shoulder went. The words just lay flat on the page. I was saying my prayers, taking services, and doing all that I had to, but it was unbelievably difficult. I knew that God was there listening to my prayers, honouring me in the things I was doing, but it didn’t feel like it. However,

I knew that it was what I was doing that counted, my feelings were immaterial. I always knew God loved me, even in the depths when I didn’t feel He was there.

So, I ended up sort of drifting into this church. The incumbent was a bishop, and we became very close friends. We talked a lot in our weekly meetings, and he quickly put me in this role, started using me just as we talked. At that point, God became real again, around six years after the accident.

I like to think of Christ as disabled by his gaping wounds, maybe He goes through heaven limping. Although my brain has improved and I can remember what I am doing this afternoon without looking in my diary every 10 minutes, I still find many things difficult. It’s not that I like the idea of Jesus with a disability, but the idea that we are the same.



I believe there are three types of healing: when you are completely better and can throw away your crutches, when you accept what’s going on and move on from self-pity and the last great healing of all, when you are with God forever.

I later knew that because of the accident I had post-traumatic stress disorder. When soldiers started coming back from Afghanistan, I read something in the New Scientist. I thought “I get that, I get flashbacks, nightmares and wake up with a jerk kicking poor old John (my husband) in bed. I can’t get off to sleep and I have intrusive thoughts.” I had all eight classic symptoms. I found a wonderful therapist who helped me put it all into the past so I can remember it, and I am no longer hyper-vigilant.



LAURA NEALE

My experience of the Church of England has been a mixed bag. I was in the Church of England for 18 months, before COVID. I quickly moved from on-site presence to the online church version. Some good things have come out of the pandemic both locally and within the Church of England. As the group 'YouBelong' we wrote a statement, read and used by many bishops and shared with others, called 'Worshipping Together Safely'. It was about how we can be Church, and include people who are returning to Church, especially clinically vulnerable people. They have implemented it in many places e.g., the use of masks, and having separate spaces for people who feel vulnerable. There is a difference between online church and church online. We're not just livestreaming 'a thing' you watch, you are included in an online community.

My disability is not visible, and this can create some misunderstanding of what it means to have a disability. I can walk into a church building and sit down. If I need to walk further, I either don't do it or use a wheelchair. At the end of the service when I have been sitting with my parents waiting to go home, I have been approached to help tidy away the chairs. I have had to say "no" but haven't had time to explain why. It is hard to explain what my situation is and that I can't help, despite looking and appearing like I can.

"One of the key things I think of about Jesus is the miracle of His resurrection. But God didn't make Him whole in the human version of what that looks like, He came back with His wounds."

We can include people on Zoom, or recordings of people doing a reading or prayer. There are some churches who have set up tables with laptops so you can connect with somebody who's at home, so they come into your coffee time that way.

An important thing about *YouBelong* is that we don't have a Sunday service. We are about the Monday-Saturday stuff. I think that's where a lot of churches, even pre-COVID, struggled to keep that connection and community feel. Community is our focus. For me, going to church on Sunday would mean Monday, and Tuesday are written off so I couldn't socialize with anybody then. If I did, that would mean writing off the next few days. It's crucial that through the relationships built online or on site we are building community. For me with *YouBelong* that is what we are about and hopefully many churches are too.

What we often do on a Sunday is ask people to share where they've been. We also chat about what people have been reading or discuss what they've learnt and are applying.

I have a theology degree in youth work and although there are some aspects of it I'm not using, it has taught me to reflect often, not just on myself but on what we are doing. If something doesn't work out, that's fine. We can move on, and there's no problem with that. It's about continually being aware of what's going on and being able to change it and listen to God. It's not just about ramps or the hearing loop systems. Our language is key. The words we use both online and on site, can be damaging. The words people hear will tell them how you truly feel about them and whether you love and welcome them the way that God made them.

I hear a lot of other people's experiences of 'healing'. There is awkwardness, when I have been for prayer, and something hasn't happened. They ask, is it your fault? Have you done something wrong? Have you not prayed hard enough? Or is it my fault? Have I not believed enough for you? Then it's "let's bring the elders, and get oil", but nothing happens. They are left asking "whose fault is it?" because clearly, it's not God's fault - He wouldn't do that. So, what does that mean? I've heard of people who have gone up to the front for prayer in a wheelchair or with a stick and someone's praying for healing. The person requesting prayer wanted it for finances or relationships but

they're just assuming that healing is what they want. Healing is a tricky thing that must be done gently, with caution and handled well.

How I feel God sees my disability has been a journey. It's not something that just happened. Even now, I am not always in a place of acceptance or understanding. When I first became unwell, it was very confusing, but for some reason I can't explain, I had peace.

Sometimes I think "if I were cured today, would everything would be better?" Then I wonder, would I be doing, *YouBelong?* And honestly, I don't know. I can see God in this situation and that he's using me in this way. Then I have moments where I'm thinking, but, if I was better, I could do so much more for God.

I'll ask for prayer, particularly when I am in pain, but I don't ask for a cure for my condition. I think that's because without *YouBelong* I don't know who I am, and that's not healthy. I think that God is using me so much in this, that it is who I am, and I honestly can't think of anything I'd rather be doing. It's using all the things that I love most about being with and talking with people. We have fun and sometimes we have hard days. We talk about rubbish stuff and good things that have happened. That's what community and relationship are all about, and that's where I feel I am being used now.

One of the key things I think of about Jesus is the miracle of his resurrection. But God didn't make Him whole in the human version of what that looks like, He came back with His wounds. They were there as evidence of what happened, and that it was truly Him. He came back with flaws and people saw His broken body; therefore, my broken body is made perfect in Him. It's the way God is using it and it's the way it is meant to be. I go back to the classic "we're all fearfully and wonderfully made exactly as we are". The world sees us as broken, but we're perfect in our imperfectness, as humans, and as children of God.

LUCY WINTER

(In order to preserve anonymity names have been changed).

Initially I was nervous about going to church because of the children. My only experience of church was that you could hear a pin drop and it would be inappropriate if your child made a noise, but the welcome at our church was great. I've always been open about Peter's hidden disability. As soon as I met the Children's Pastor, she totally understood. When I spoke to her, she said, "is he autistic?" So, she knew even before I did, which was fine with me. She's always been able to take him forward and he loves going most of the time. I think the initial welcome was brilliant. It was vital, really. It was everything. We are very lucky that our church has always been very relaxed. That's why we go, children can come up and down the aisle, it doesn't matter if you're late, or have to leave, you're made to feel comfortable and welcome.

I think more traditional churches could have an area for children, it doesn't even have to be a big room. A quiet space with a few sensory toys. That would have been an absolute life saver. Or even if they welcomed families at the start of the service and said that it was okay if children made noise, that they would be accepted and loved, that's the message of *Love Thy Neighbour!*

Often the children get rewarded if they know their Bible verse, Peter was once given a whistle which made the weekend a nightmare and sweets another time which made him hyperactive! However, on a positive, recently after speaking to the vicar about how my son loves having a job and loves computers, someone from the tech team invited him to help on Sundays. That was brilliant and helpful.

Peter would also like to be in the prayer team. Children praying for each other or for adults could be powerful. Who says they can't? I think all the children could be on teams. My daughter loves setting up with me when I am on the Kids Team. That would be such a time saver for the grown-ups if the kids set up the toys with a parent.



When you have an autistic child life can be really difficult. I remind myself that Peter is the gift that's been given to me and that I haven't been given anything that I can't cope with. God will give me the tools and he has, mainly through the church as well.

I've always believed that our God is a good God. Sometimes because of low self-esteem I have thought that I am not good enough and have asked, why us? But then if God gave me Peter who needs extra help and care, then that's an amazing privilege! But that's been a journey, since I didn't always feel like that, and being a Christian for the last three years has helped massively. Having church on Sundays and your Bible study group leader to go to when you are struggling as a parent is an absolute gift from God.

Autism can take years to diagnose and when you are a new parent in church you fill in the form and leave your child with the group leader. If you had a chance for a quick chat, it would really help your child, the leader, and the rest of the group. You could have an open conversation and give them suggestions. When they join the kids' group, it's amazing how much planning is involved and the things they learn are amazing.

I've always been blown away by how strong his faith is and how he just absolutely believes. Occasionally he will have questions which we do our best to answer, but these don't shake his faith - he always prays at lunchtime and at other times. I was ill recently, and Peter said, "mummy I'm going to pray, if God can part the sea, then he can heal my mummy". It's quite mind blowing and sweet.

When I became a Christian, I already had my son. In a way, it has enforced my faith. When I have prayed for help, God's always delivered. There are

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three clergy at church, and all three of their partners have been of help to me. The first taught me to run for my mental health. The second, an occupational therapist sees Peter regularly, and the third taught me the "circle of security" parenting course, all at no cost. The love that has come from God through the church is never ending and that affirms my faith.

My experience has been very positive. In my small group, conversations about autism with other families bring people together, especially if they have concerns about their children. At times, though, it can get dark, but this doesn't last long now.

People have offered to pray for Peter to be healed, however, I wouldn't change Peter. I pray for him to be able to cope and have friends and live his best life. I don't believe he needs be healed. I don't know if I would feel differently if he was non-verbal? As he stands, he's funny, clever, and bright and no, I wouldn't change him. Maybe that is something that I have come to accept through meeting Christ. That that is how he was created, and God loves us exactly as we are and uses us all.

I think it has been very humbling having an autistic child. I think, previously, if I saw a kid kicking off in a church or in a restaurant, I might have rolled my eyes and wanted to sit somewhere else. Whereas now I try and just give an encouraging smile. It's made both of us softer hearted and more accepting. I think it helps when we are asked how they can accommodate Peter, what are his interests, triggers etc. I would like things like rewards thought through, like the example of the whistle I used before. It's important that children like Peter are made to feel comfortable. Somebody from the leadership team can say 'don't worry, nobody minds this is totally fine; if you need a space, we've got a little area over there', without making too much fuss. With Peter it helps if he sits near the front because he engages better, otherwise he constantly wants to go to the toilet. Recently our Children's Pastor explained that this could be because he is anxious. Peter also struggles when we have to move to different rooms, but this may be something unique to our church.





MARY BUCKNALL

My name is Mary Bucknall and I live in Dorset. Having come from a clergy family, what I value about the Church of England is the tradition, the liturgy and that it has a presence in every parish.

As a profoundly deaf person since birth, I felt different and a failure, and this affected my self-esteem while growing up. I was often angry and frustrated that I could not hear the spoken word (speech) even with a powerful hearing aid, and that other people could listen to talks, lectures, and sermons so effortlessly. I would think, “Why can others hear, and not me?” The stress and frustration of lip-reading tended to make me switch off.

Deafness is a struggle, an invisible one. It's hard to keep up, to function, to make sense of anything, without being informed. The loneliness and isolation are the worst part, but wonderful people have come alongside me and helped me. Someone (who was also disabled), told me about the “compensations” of disability and that made it easier to accept.

The Old Testament references to deafness, e.g. Isaiah 35:5 “The ears of the deaf will be unstopped”, and Leviticus 19:14 “Do not place a stumbling block in front of the blind or curse the deaf”, have been a source of strength. I hope I will hear in heaven, and this is what keeps me going, although at times I have wished I could die.

I did not understand disability theologically, when I was growing up. I had a secular view of disability. “Why was I different from everyone else?” “Why was I at a disadvantage?” I asked. I put this down to ignorance about God and the Bible, partly due to my deafness when I was younger. Having gained some theological education since then, I now understand that the Kingdom of God is often “upside down” (cf The Magnificat) so that the weak are used to shame the strong. This has given me a more holistic perspective on disability and an understanding of the reasons why disability exists in the world.

In the past I was always struggling to “overcome” my deafness, getting hurt in the process. However, I have now learnt to live within my limitations. Deafness is very situational, which makes it harder to know what to do in each situation. Not knowing all the facts, for example, can make one seem idiotic. It is easier to socially withdraw from situations when there is no dependable support from family members, friends, or sign language interpreters. I used to compare myself with others when I was younger, but I've learnt that this is unnecessary. I can just be me, within limits of course.

Acceptance is vital. I feel happier and more at peace now. However, I still avoid social situations, getting lonely and isolated in the process. Perhaps the main question is: “Am I being loving to my neighbour, or not?” I think I am not loving enough, as I tend to fear people, because I might not be able to read their lips properly. etc. People are such an unknown quantity to me. Despite this, I realise that one has to go out to meet people, not hide away at home. I realise the need to take on board afresh the two great commandments in Scripture: to love God and to love my neighbour as myself, and this applies to all of us, whether deaf or not.

I wondered whether being born deaf meant God loved me less, but I look back and see that he had a plan for my life. It may be challenging to say this, but perhaps deafness and disability are somehow part of his plan? Deafness is inexplicable. When I suffer, I think of what Jesus had to go through. “The dark threads are as needful in the weaver's skilful hand, as the gold and silver threads in the pattern he has planned.” (from “The Weaving” by Corrie Ten Boom).

Some disabilities are not visible, and this also gave me greater insight, instead of seeing hearing people as the lucky ones who seemed to have it all. Some people are spiritually unaware, which is very

“Having gained some theological education since then, I now understand that the Kingdom of God is often ‘upside down’ so that the weak are used to shame the strong.”

sad indeed. God needs to reach everyone through the gospel. We live in an imperfect world and only God is perfect.

The healing of sickness, disability and mental illness in the New Testament was designed to reveal the glory of God to an unbelieving world. If everyone was perfect, there would be no need for healing and therefore the glory of God wouldn't be revealed. People who had faith were healed. Jesus said to them, "Your faith has saved you". Therefore, healing and salvation were interconnected.

I believe everyone is special in God's eyes. It has taken me a long time to realise this, as sin and suffering obscures so much of what is intrinsically good. Humility is very important, for both disabled and non-disabled people; there is no room for pride, arrogance or feeling that one is more special than other people. Forgiveness is also part of the equation and surrender is vital i.e., the acceptance of God's will in one's life.



To summarise, I felt incomplete in some way due to my deafness, and was always trying to make up for this, to push myself harder. It was difficult not to seem lazy or become lazy. In fact, I just avoided human contact and spent my time reading and writing instead, especially at school and college. I did have one or two good friends at college, however, whom I could lip-read well, and they seemed to want to know me - amazing really!

God can't have seen me as incomplete, however, but just another example of his endlessly varied creation. But it's still a struggle to know what I should be doing, and what I should not be doing, at each point in time without communication support, which is essential.

MIKE CASSIDY

The welcome I've received in church has been interesting. I've had very few problems, and I don't think it's the Church of England's problem, it's down to the people in the Church. I think the Church of England has been slow to take up the disability cause but are moving in the right direction. I know I've always been welcomed. I think it takes time for people to get used to you, to trust you. When people smile and look welcoming it's always a good start and when people are not possessive about where they sit, it's helpful too. A simple welcome that is not overexuberant is good. "Hey, how are you? Can I help in any way?" and telling you where the loo is works well.



I started coming to church as a Catholic originally; then I was confirmed. To get involved in church life takes a while, people need to learn that you're trustworthy. They see your level of spirituality and they think this guy will be able to serve God. In our church I joined a Bible study group and then became part of the ministry team.

With regards to healing I'm a retired physiotherapist, so I've always had an interest in healing and well-being. I became a churchwarden in 1987. People think "how can a blind bloke be a churchwarden? He can't see the building, he can't see this, he can't see that!". There is more to Church than a building, big time!

I think listening is important and one of the problems I have had is that people don't ask "How can I help you?". You are grabbed and pushed down the aisle. I have had to train people; the official way is to put my hand behind their elbow, and they lead. I try and use humour and say, "look if you lead, you can fall down the steps first or up them, rather than both of us falling down the stairs".

I have been able to both lead and preach. I have always found the fact that I can't make eye contact interesting. How does it come across to the congregation I wonder? I don't know whether people are falling asleep or hanging their heads, thinking what the heck is this guy talking about?

I don't think God sees me as any more of a flawed image than anyone else. If you look at sin, we are all sinners. We live in a fallen world. God didn't make me flawed. He didn't stop me from being disabled, but clearly there is a purpose in that. It's so I can show others how these disabilities, which are thrust on all of us in some way or other, can be managed.

I can also share my burdens with Him when life's tough - and He's always listening.

We all fall short of the glory of God. So therefore, you know, we're all in the same boat. And from that point of view, it's up to us to work with God to find the best in the world which he made but didn't corrupt.

When it comes to heaven, the question of walking or seeing doesn't come into it. Indeed, in that world, we are all perfect. There, there will be no sorrow, there'll be no grieving, no pain, or tears. And we see that in Revelation, don't we? A new heaven and earth.

If you look at the Old Testament, you see what the culture was like in those times. And you see it in the New Testament as well. There were some who thought that if you're blind, that's because of the sins of your father. But Jesus overrules all that. So, he affirms disability. He did heal disabilities, but he didn't heal everyone. He showed that he could heal people and he did. It's very interesting.

We have freedom in Christ. This doesn't mean to say you can go and do whatever you want. It means we have the freedom from sin in Christ.

In Norwich they want to try and encourage younger people to lead in worship, but I think probably older people did this more than the younger ones. I have been able to both lead and preach. I have always found the fact that I can't make eye contact interesting. How does it come across to the congregation I wonder? I don't know whether people are falling asleep or hanging their heads, thinking what the heck is this guy talking about?

I don't think that my understanding of God has changed because of being blind, rather I think it has been enhanced over time. I think in regularly reading the Bible, talking to others, and walking with God, there hasn't been any change. I don't rail at God for being blind or anything like that. I feel my understanding has been enhanced because we can share our burden with God. See what He's got to say about it.

The vulnerability of Jesus in the garden was horrendous, really. What was going to happen to Him? He knew full well, which is more than we ever do. Also, the fact that He was going to descend to the dead. People forget that bit. He went right down there, separated from God. Which I think I can only imagine the sheer pain of that when you've had such intimacy. We don't know what it was like, only Christ knows that. He did that for us all, whether we have a disability or not.





SAL BRINTON

In my current church the welcome has been lovely. It's fine until you go somewhere where you are not known, or not a speaker. Then people's attitudes are founded by their view of your disability. With regards the physical welcome, churchwardens, vicars and other members of the clergy team have all been fine, but their knowledge and understanding of disability issues is woeful. I wonder if there is a handbook or a course that a parochial church council can run for itself just to make people think slightly outside of the box? I have rheumatoid arthritis and when it's bad my fine motor control is very poor. Therefore, when I'm offered communion wafers in the special gluten free box, I can't pick it up. I often have to say to the person, "please, can you put it in my hands". The issue is about just thinking, "is there someone here with a disability? Do I need to ask them?"

Something that bugged me almost everywhere I went to was people leading services, saying, "now please all stand...". What I've trained our team to do is to say, "please stand if you are able" and what they've done is they've given permission for people for whom it is difficult to stand, to stay seated.

When I joined the Watford church, we were building a new church. I was visibly disabled as were some elderly people. They still managed to build it so that I couldn't access the dais and read. I had to either take my ramp from home or do intercessions. Therefore, in terms of new or refurbished churches there are simple things that can be done to make them accessible, and it shows that the church's heart is in making the place inclusive.

The consultants say to you repeatedly "our aim is to get you into remission". But people pray for you to be instantly healed. I know they mean terribly well but I will say "actually my problem is that my disease has flared up, can you pray for....."

I believe I have a duty to say to people, "can I check accessibility at the venue?" And I give them a checklist. I try to guide them by saying "For me the most helpful place would be....". However, then there is turning up at a church where a member of your family is being confirmed. That is problematic, especially if the family have got seats reserved in pews.

"Something that bugged me almost everywhere I went to was people leading services, saying, 'now please all stand...'"

I've been talking to a friend who's also got an autoimmune disease and who is dying. We've been talking about how God views our disability. There are times when I am unwell and I'm immunosuppressed, and I get serious infections. But I am confident of God's love, and Julian of Norwich is one of my go-to places. I also look at the example that Christ set and the way he tackled people with illnesses, and it was all about God's love and miracles. But there is much more than that. There is an acceptance that people are

different. And if one of their differences is a disability, then that can also be a blessing. I mean, if you'd asked me at the beginning of my journey how I would have viewed having to use a wheelchair, being in constant pain when I'm not in remission and knowing it's going to happen for the rest of my life, I'd have just said I couldn't possibly bear it. But being able to turn to God, day after day, to put those things at the bottom of the cross is part of my faith. It is just like there's a calmness that comes when you've done it, of knowing that you're not walking this journey alone. There is something that is going to happen afterwards that we Christians long for. We may be scared about the transition, but I know that glory, in whatever form it takes, will be there. I have learnt so much on my journey of disability, both in church and in the wider world that I wouldn't want it to be different in any way at all. If someone said, "you know, we can just take you back and just change it?" I would say "No, absolutely not, because it's part of who I am".

I still get approached in my church by someone wanting to pray for healing for me because I'm not viewed as a ²Baroness there, the prophet in their own town, etc. It wouldn't happen if I'm speaking at Spring Harvest. But I think that's because I've got a title or 'status'. If we're talking to colleagues in the

²Baroness Brinton is a Lib Dem front bench member of the House of Lords.

church who are not disabled, they need to understand this, because it's a problem that needs to be solved. It is a fundamental issue, it's not like an infection which can just go away, it really isn't.

A contemporary of my daughter's had very severe Down's Syndrome, and I have a nephew with Down's Syndrome as well. I was certainly aware of our church community in Histon enabling the entire family to be part of it. However, having a disability has made me understand what it is like as a lived experience.

I have six autoimmune diseases and one of them was responsible for my multiple miscarriages. After the fourth or fifth one I went through a period where I couldn't pray. Our wonderful vicar at the time said to me, "just keep saying the words Sal because God is listening every time you do". I needed that. I don't know how many other people have been through that sort of absolute terror of the blackness of the future and the constant grief. I think that was where I learnt about physically putting my problems at the foot of the cross. Being humble enough to hand them over to somebody else, to God, and for them to cease being something that I needed to worry about because he had the vision of my life, whatever that was. It's been part of the journey that we go on. That really affected me profoundly and made me understand that, even at our blackest times, God is always there supporting us in everything we do.

ANONYMOUS

This participant preferred to be anonymous. Stigma and prejudice against people with mental health challenges are real, and they feared the consequences of their employer reading this account.

I live with clinical depression and have been part of the Church of England. When I was in London, I wasn't supported by the Church as an organization but rather by the people I met in church. This was mainly due to a lack of understanding and poor perception of mental illness. The church counselling team, who weren't qualified, wanted to pray away my mental health problems and make everything better. I ended up changing my tune because they were getting upset that their prayers weren't working.

I think the church struggled with the cyclical nature of mental health that means you can sometimes be okay and sometimes feel terrible. I wouldn't be asked to do anything just in case I was unwell. Instead, they could, for example, have partnered me with someone else to run a course like Alpha. This would have been a safeguard for when I had a bad day. I was just viewed as an unreliable person and crossed off. I really wanted to use my skills/gifts, which is one reason why I left that church.

People are more open nowadays and in the last five years we have seen a huge rise in the kind of 'time to talk' help. We can't underestimate the impact of the two princes talking about how it was for them, and how that has brought about change. There will be challenges for the Church and I don't think they will get it right straight away, and with more people coming forward it may become overwhelming.

In certain churches, talking about your personal health is seen as spiritual weakness. Saying, "I know I have been running the prayer ministry team for a year, but I need a month off, and then I would feel able to come back again" is seen as succumbing to weakness. Rather than seen like a sabbatical to affirm peoples' need for a different mental space and rest. A pastor said to me that

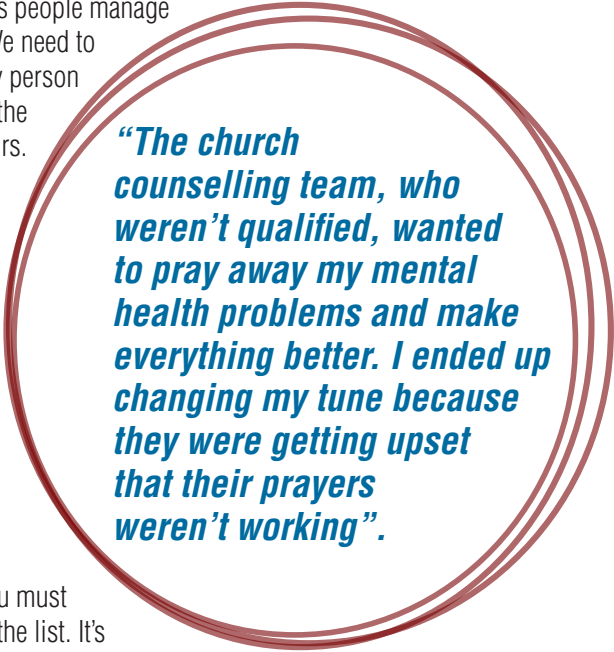


the maximum period he can do anything in the church is for two years. Then he gave the example of resigning and asking the church whether they wanted to re-appoint him. He set a precedent – nobody should be in a role for more than two years. This helps people manage their mental resources. We need to stop saying 'I am the only person who can do this.' That is the church's problem not yours. Self-care is a positive not a negative. There is a spiritual value in looking after yourself, rather than been seen as worldly and weak.

They say that JOY is Jesus Others and Yourself last. That isn't a helpful message when you have mental health problems. Sometimes you must put yourself at the top of the list. It's not a sin to say I need to look after myself now. It can be a wise and healthy thing to do.

When I read the Bible, I see a God for whom rest, grounding, nature and friendships are important. All the way through, from Elijah being told to sleep, to stories where Jesus gets to the heart of stuff, in a comforting and kind way. Often this is skipped over. I have seen some of the great themes through the Bible in new ways through this God who is kind and gentle with people, and for whom heaven is a real promise of belonging and hope.

I have learnt a lot from friends with physical disabilities. Being with people who have limited capacity, and agency in their lives has really turned upside down what living the faith looks like to me. When I meet people, it's "What can I do for you?" But for others it's "I can't do a lot. I stay in bed until my carer comes and they help me get out of bed and get dressed". It has made



“The church counselling team, who weren’t qualified, wanted to pray away my mental health problems and make everything better. I ended up changing my tune because they were getting upset that their prayers weren’t working”.

me realize “does God love them more or less than me working as hard as I can?”. The same or more is the answer. It's not about action or activity. Grace is grace. God really loves you. The number of things you have control over are limited, you can be friendly with your carer, or you can smile at other care home residents. That's not a lot. The other side of that is intellectual impairment. I grew up in this evangelical life which was all about learning to go deeper with God. Read a book, listen to some sermons, learn Hebrew etc. But for people with intellectual impairments, what do we say when they want to go deeper with God? I've realized that God loves me no matter what. It's not about learning, it's about Jesus's character. It has given me a new freedom that I never knew.

I have clinical depression and one of the things that people don't talk about is that Christianity can be quite an oppressive religion. The Christian life can lead people into depression because we live in this tension between the now and the not yet, which is incredibly frustrating. We believe in a powerful God who can do anything and yet we see things which are in desperate need of his intervention. We believe in healing and justice but don't see it happening yet. It's a lot to carry in your heart. I therefore try to bring a gentleness to people because I think mental health issues can be a sign of people grappling with these issues. Being gentle with people has become part of my character, but people would much rather you be strong. It would be fantastic if I ever found a church where this gentleness was practised.

I think weakness is a strength, but people want to turn around very fast, for example 'look I sprained my ankle, and the Doctor became a Christian.' But what if it's not like that? It's like someone being in a terrible car crash and you turning around and saying 'hey, mate you can be a Paralympian', when they probably won't, they are going to have to make upsetting changes in their lives.

Sometimes the gift of our faith comes at a cost. For some, that means having mental health problems. We must realize that God is gentle. There are plenty of churchmanships where sitting and having a bit of a cry is standard for a Sunday morning. Or having a quiet meditation or going on a retreat. And I think that is one thing that has encouraged me in my faith, in realizing that there are different ways of doing things.

Postscript by the Right Reverend Richard Atkinson, OBE, Bishop of Bedford and Chair of the Church's Committee for Ministry of and among Deaf and Disabled People.

Last year a Lent pilgrimage, in the form of a series of visits to some of the local groups and activities working with disabled people in Bedfordshire, introduced me to some of the very special disabled people in our county. Among them was Jack who, as part of the cerebral palsy community, guided me round our local falconry centre, and a number of young people at Spectrum Arts, led by the inspiring Jade, who tolerated me joining their dance session. Along with many others, these are just some of the very special disabled people who bring so much to our community.

I also recall my visit to the headquarters of Mencap. In particular, my conversation with Edel, the Chief Executive, who talked about Mencap's commitment to inclusion and ensuring that the voice of those with learning disabilities is heard at the heart of their work. As a sign of this they are to remove the strap-line 'The voice of learning disability' from the outside of their headquarters building. What matters is not the voice of Mencap but the voice of those with learning disabilities – their voice at the core of everything they do including their governance and leadership.

As Chair of the Church of England Committee for Ministry of and among Deaf and Disabled People, and its Disability Task Group, I am privileged to learn from, and work with, many disabled clergy and laity in our churches. Those who, like the voices heard in this booklet, are both a gift to the church and a challenge to its impaired inclusion. As you read these testimonies, I ask you, especially if you see yourself as non-disabled, to play your part in ensuring that the voice of those people who are disabled is heard fully within our church, as part of that radical inclusion and belonging that is truly the Church of Christ.

+ Richard Bedford.

