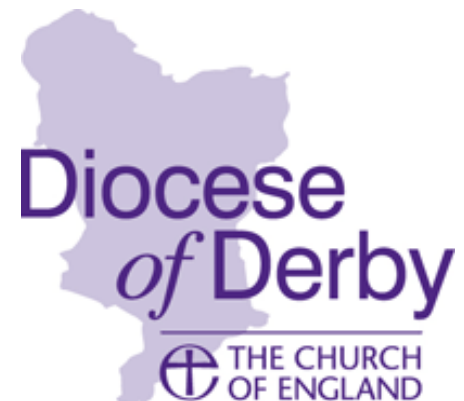


Discipleship Mission & Ministry



The Disabling Church...

and what to do about it!

A report - prepared for the Diocese of Derby - that responds to the experiences of d/Deaf, disabled, and neurodiverse people and suggests an ongoing process to engage creatively with the challenges of attitude, access and agency that limit disabled people and those who journey with them.

Summary Document

Author: Tim Rourke and the Disability Inclusion Working Group
for the
Discipleship, Mission & Ministry Team

Date: September 2021

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The Process So Far

Disabled people and the Church – An Introduction

The church has had a strong conviction throughout history that it should provide care, support and love **for** disabled people. There has been a sense of commitment and justice **for** those in need, and through the years that has included speaking up **for** the needs of disabled people and their families.

Recently there have been some small steps towards **listening to** and **hearing from** disabled people. Inclusive Church, Disability and Jesus and others have begun conversations **led by** disabled people. Some in the church have begun to listen.

In July 2021 Tim Rourke (who is a disabled Church Army Evangelist) was asked by the Diocese of Derby to listen to disabled people and to make recommendations for improving their inclusion into the whole of diocesan and local church life.

We believe that this beginning to listen may signify a Kairos moment for the whole church. When disabled people share their insights and understanding about the nature of God it can build, with others to shape a more inclusive diverse church for the future.

The process so far

A group of Disabled Christians called the Disability Inclusion Working Group were formed. This group developed a Baseline Study, which was completed by Christmas 2020. This helped the DIWG to listen to a range of disabled Christians experiences and reflect on the bridges and barriers to disability inclusion in Derby diocese. All this was augmented by personal reading and networking with national disability advisors and disabled theologians.

This final report is the culmination of the years' work. This report issues three challenges to the Diocese of Derby and our local churches and suggests a way forward to embed and develop disability inclusion over future years.

If the Diocese and Synod are prepared to accept these challenges and use them as Statements of Intent, that will give the Disability Inclusion Action Group authority to encourage change and to challenge situations where these 'statements of intent' need reinforcing.

Our main recommendation, therefore, is to setup and resource a Disability Inclusion Action Group to enable the Diocese and local churches to respond to the challenges found in this report and embed them into the future life of the diocese

The Challenges

Challenge 1 – Attitudes

The Diocese of Derby wants to challenge and change all attitudes that limit the lives of disabled people in our churches and structures.

Recommendations

- *To develop a Disability Inclusion Action Group to challenge the whole Diocese and embed the recommendations of this report into local church life.*
- *To provide a clear challenge to opinions that diminish disabled people's lives within churches in this diocese, by producing resources and training, especially about*

identity, healing and the hurt caused by unhelpful 'theologies' that blame sin and a lack of faith as the cause of illness and disability.

- *To develop a team of preachers and speakers able to communicate at diocesan and local church services and events in ways that encourage disabled people in local congregations and challenge harmful interpretations of the Bible that limit disabled people.*
- *To develop our theological understanding of disability to benefit the DIAG group and the wider church. To listen to the experience of disabled people and reflect on what that teaches us about God and the nature of church that is striving to be 'Simpler, Humbler and Bolder'.*

Owing to the history of UK society and the role the church has played in that, disabled people and their carers have been treated in a wide variety of ways: demonized, feared, judged, pitied, cared for, looked after and loved. If you are a disabled person, you will almost certainly have been 'ministered to' as one of the 'poor and needy'. This charity model of care has led to disabled people being seen as less than fully human and a target for the churches' ministry, rather than as fellow disciples sharing the Good News of Jesus.

Since the 1980's across the UK, disabled people have found their voice. No longer wishing to be treated as less than human, within the political and social spheres they have made some strides towards change. We believe that God is calling us, as his people, to respond to this call from the world.

As disabled people engage with local churches they meet with a range of attitudes and practices that build bridges but can also raise barriers. Some churches are flexible and adaptable while others are more rigid and resistant to change.

This section of the report reflects in some depth about the ways that the attitude of churches and individuals impacts on the experiences of disabled people in their congregations and parishes

Challenge 2 – Access

The Diocese of Derby wants to remove all barriers that stop disabled people engaging with church, both online and in our buildings.

Recommendations

- *To develop a link between the advisory group and the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) as a resource for churches undertaking physical changes to help them include the needs of disabled people.*
- *To develop a local 'Access Audit' process to enable local churches to look at all aspects of access in their buildings and give help to prioritise a range of options to follow*
- *To investigate grants and internal budgets to fund an access budget for regular diocesan processes and to support the ongoing work and administration of the Disability Inclusion Action Group (DIAG).*

This section looks at barriers which exclude disabled people in our Christian communities, focusing on Church Buildings, meeting online and structural barriers within the Diocese. It suggests that the Action Group and the DAC should together develop tools for working with

local churches, providing access audits where necessary. It looks at developing online resources that communicate clearly with people even when the online world builds its own communication barriers.

The report also looks at the structures of Synods within the Diocese. It suggests that the Diocese needs to look at external funding to keep up with the promises that were made in 2007 to have a Diocesan Advisor and to ensure that 'disability issues are made an integral part of the functioning of Diocesan structures'. The report makes the suggestion that high level decisions and processes around Disability Inclusion would help to stop the excluding practices that come from things being decided on a case-by-case basis.

One of the key factors around access is for there to be – at the outset of any and all planning – a conscious resolve to make disability inclusion a priority, rather than for such planning to be added in as an afterthought. This enables disabled voices to be heard and lessens the likelihood that they will be excluded when things need adapting at short notice.

Challenge 3 – Agency

The Diocese of Derby wants to celebrate the lives of all disabled people and provide space for them to minister alongside others in response to God's love.

Recommendations

- *To provide resources for several events to happen each year for disabled people to meet and respond to God.*
- *To encourage and provide challenge and support for Diocesan discernment processes to deepen the understanding of and increase the proportion of disabled leaders in the church. Disabled people should be represented in these processes.*
- *To develop a way for disabled people to raise feedback on their inclusion and exclusion, both locally and at diocesan level.*

This section looks at how engaging with the experiences of disabled people can help to shape the church's understanding of faith and broaden our understanding of God. As the experience of disabled people has been seen as irrelevant for so much of church history, engaging with disabled people now helps to bring fresh ideas and perspectives.

The report examines discipleship and opportunities for specific groups within the disabled community to meet with God. Learning from current groups like Holding Space, Open Doors and the Deaf Church in Derby, and working with carers, disabled adults and children we look at how to discover fresh and creative ways for people to engage with God.

We are concerned that disabled people who are responding to God's call need better adaptations. The tasks of ministry to be adapted to the needs and capacities of the person, not the other way round. Not being able to minister in current models and working patterns should be seen not as a weakness of the individual, but as a weakness of a structure that tries to fit people into prescribed boxes instead of working with them to find solutions.

In relation to the specific call of disabled people to ordination, Canon C4 3 caused the group a large amount of concern. The wording of the Canon creates a dichotomy between the person and their impairment which undermines the experiences of the disabled person as a unique individual. Looking at the experiences of disabled people it appears to give the church an easy way of saying 'no' to when a better answer would be, 'yes, and we'll adapt as needs be.'

In examining the structures of Diocese we have discovered that there is work needed to give disabled people a way of speaking and shaping decisions. Due to a lack of representation of d/Deaf, Disabled and Neurodiverse Christians, it will take time and conscious effort to effect changes.

Moving forwards

Disability Inclusion and the Diocesan Vision

Disabled people are automatically a part of the Diocesan vision of 'Transforming lives, Growing church and Building Community'. As a significant group within the Diocese who can speak from experience to the around 20% of people in our parishes who are disabled and their families and friends. Disabled Christians and their carers must be charged with doing our part to bring the vision to fruition.

The report looks at the hoped-for figures within the vision document and reminds us that if we expect 5000 new disciples, that 1000 of them would be expected to be disabled people. And if we are expecting leadership to follow the same pattern 200 lay leaders and 10 ordained leaders will also be called to serve as disabled people.

The report asks the question if we are ready and adaptable enough for that to happen, and also encourages planning and preparation for this so that disabled people are in our plans, rather than an afterthought.

Proposed Disabled People's Action Group

Aims

To enable churches to meet the challenges that the Bishops and Diocesan Synod accept and are set out above.

Membership & Roles

The members of the original DIWG were all disabled people. To change the culture of the Diocese needs other allies as well. This includes 'Carers', a Bishop or Archdeacon, someone involved in Children's work and/or the Board of Education and others.

The group will need a strong shape and good leadership. The meetings need to be flexible and adaptable so that the group can be as inclusive as possible. There is a need for administrative and technical support to help minimise the practical challenges.

The annual running costs for this group without a paid diocesan advisor are laid out in the main report but should be around £3600 per annum (Averaged over 3 years)

Terms of Reference

The final recommendations from this report will provide a starting point to the group; however, it is important that the group develops its own shape so that it can be responsive to the needs of Derby diocese in the future and continue to listen deeply, reflect (and research), network (support) and teach.

Appendix 1 – Language and Glossary of Terms

Disabled Person/People

In this report we have chosen this term to describe one or more people who have a disability, as described in the Equalities act, which is both long-term & substantial. This has been chosen as it is the term used by most disabled people to describe themselves and is rooted in the social model of disability which enables the asking of the question, 'who and how are we disabled by society and our communities?'

We have chosen not to use 'people with a disability' or any of the other euphemisms (eg 'Differently Abled' or 'Dis/abled') for disability, as some other documents do. In our experience they are most often used by non-disabled people about disabled people.

However, we are aware that the individual nature of people's journeys with disability can mean that people may use other phrases about themselves, which we would use in any individual discussions with them.

d/Deaf or deaf/Deaf Person

These phrases are used to describe deaf people in this document. 'Deaf' refers to people who were born Deaf and have British Sign Language (BSL) as their main language whereas 'deaf' refers to people who have become deaf during their life and often have English (or another spoken language) as their main language.

Many people in the d/Deaf community do not describe themselves as disabled people, so we have used 'd/Deaf and disabled people' in places where we are talking about both communities and either 'd/Deaf' or 'disabled people' when we are talking predominantly about one or other groups.

Neurodiversity

In the descriptions used around d/Deaf, Disabled and Neurodivergent people, we chose, on advice, to specify the term 'neurodiversity' to include a specific experience of people who experience the world in different ways to the neurotypical.

From the perspective of the neurodiversity movement, neurodiversity is an aspect of God's good creation, and there is nothing 'wrong' with people with neurological differences - who may be autistic or dyslexic, or have ADHD or Tourettes, or another condition that means they think differently from the 'norm'.

This group of people often fit well within the description of Disabled people that we chose to use, but in the context of church, and especially healing and cure it felt important to represent them.

This group are often very hurt by the inference that they need healing of their neurodiversity, as their neurodiversity is wrapped up in their identity and understanding of self and the world.

Impairment

This is the term that we use in this report to describe a person's medical condition or specific mental or physical health needs. This, rather technical, description comes from its use in the equalities act and its derivation from the social model of disability.

This terminology can be helpful as it enables one person to say 'I have a spinal impairment which causes me pain and lack of mobility, and I am disabled due to the lack of ramps and access in the build environment'

Unfortunately, it can be difficult language for some, as 'impairment' can be a part of the language used generally to describe their medical condition. I.e. Hearing or visually impaired.

People with x

Occasionally in this report when we write about specific groups of disabled people who have a shared impairment, we will use the term (e.g.) People with Downs Syndrome. This is quite a common way that groups who are setup to help those groups use language.

We do use this with care, as there are many groups who do not follow this convention. Good examples are blind people, and autistic people. We have used our best knowledge to use the term most commonly used by that community, but again would stress that it is important, when communicating with a specific person, to use the term they would choose.

Terminology around children - SEND or Additional Needs

SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) is a term used to describe children in a school environment. It includes disabled children, but also other forms of educational needs.

'Additional needs' is another phrase that is often used to describe children with SEND. We are aware of both terms but feel that 'Disabled People' in our report should read for people of all ages, unless specified. In some of the case studies SEND & Additional needs could be used synonymously with 'disabled children'

Intersectionality

Although this has not come up a lot in this report, where the numbers of people are not sub-divided into other groups, It must be noted that the experience and outcomes of disabled people will also be impacted by other protected characteristics they share. This is especially important to reflect upon in respect to the issues of social justice that are raised in the report.

The experience of disabled men and women, or young and old, or BAME or white, or people of different sexual orientations, for example, cannot be assumed to be the same. Whilst the scope of this report does not actively respond to these considerations, we are aware of the need to reflect carefully on this aspect of disabled people's lives.

Discipleship Mission & Ministry



The Disabling Church...

and what to do about it!

Author: **Tim Rourke and the Disability Inclusion Working Group**
for the
Discipleship, Mission and Ministry Team

Date: September 2021

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The Disabling Church...

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Introduction

UK History

Disabled people throughout history have been seen as less than human, either because of an inability to earn, or because the deviation from 'normal' was frightening, sinister and unwanted. Physical deformity was often taken to indicate 'mental weakness' too. Families were often shamed and for long periods of time disability was thought to indicate God's anger, possession, or sin.

The church was at the centre of these societal values but did nothing to break the links or challenge the assumption that a disabled person was not a whole or a holy person, and that, at best, disabled people should be 'cared for', loved and pitied. They were cynically seen as targets for prayer, and when miraculous cures happened (very occasionally) these were seen as signs that 'the sinner had repented' or that they glorified and somehow proved the existence of God. This status quo was generally held to be true and very few people saw disabled people as equal, unique or valuable to God. These views, while less prevalent are still found in our churches today.

In the last 40 years across the global north, disabled people have found their voice. Learning from the civil rights movements of other excluded minorities, disabled people have started to demand change. This movement with its cry of 'nothing about us, without us' has brought some changes, including, in the UK, the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act which developed into the Equality Act in 2010.

Theologically this has provided a path for disabled Christians to begin to challenge the predominant views of the established church. In 1994, in the USA, Nancy Eiland wrote her seminal book 'The Disabled God : Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability'. This book and subsequently disabled Christian people have tried to ask questions which resonate with the themes of the Disability Rights movement about value, identity, independence, disadvantage, and care.

Current Context

Disabled People's voices are now more represented in society than ever before, although there is a long way to go to get to equality. The legislation in the Equality Act has provided ways to challenge and appeal against discrimination in the workplace and public life. However, poverty, disadvantage and disability are still strongly linked (a disabled person is twice as likely to be unemployed as a non-disabled person), so reduced choices and lack of self-determination are major barriers to engagement in society. Disabled people are disabled by an unequal society every day of their lives.

Within the Church the misinformed and false connections with sin, lack of faith and fear are still prevalent, and within some strands of disability theology the emphasis on pastoral care and pity speaks over the voices of disabled people themselves. This is at the heart of the exclusion of disabled people within the church and this report attempts to provide a way to develop a healthy interdependence that can benefit everyone.

It is our opinion that God is moving at this time in the UK to help the whole Church reflect on some vital issues being raised by disabled people. For probably the first time in history disabled people are now being asked, by some, to express their experiences of God and are bringing those revelations to the wider church. Some of the themes that disabled Christians are reflecting on include identity, perfection, diversity, healing, prayer, and the power of blessing and being blessed with humility.

These insights are vital to a church trying to model a 'Simpler, Humbler, and Bolder' life. As disabled people we have abundant experience of living with limitations to life (arising both from our impairments and from society's expectations) and can share that expertise with the whole body of Christ as it travels on becoming more aware of its own vulnerabilities and limitations.

The key question is: how willing is the Church to listen to these voices of disabled people within the body of Christ?

The Process so far

The Disability Inclusion Project was set up to run for one year from July 2020 – July 2021. Tim Rourke (a disabled Church Army Evangelist) was asked to lead this project and to write and make recommendations that would help to increase the inclusion of disabled people across the diocese of Derby, in both its structures and its local Christian communities.

To manage this task, he drew a group of disabled Christian people from across the diocese. This group was the Disability Inclusion Working Group (DIWG). This group widened the experiences and understandings he could draw upon and helped to make sure that these experiences fed into the work of the group and the reports it produced. The group encompassed a range of church traditions, communities and lived experience of disability, although it was a largely professional, articulate, white, straight group of people.

The assumption behind this project is that disabled people are disadvantaged (disabled) by our church communities, and that they are less likely to be in our congregations, in our structures and in leadership in the church. The Baseline Survey report indicated strongly that this was the case demonstrating that while this was a complicated picture, some simple changes in attitudes would enable disabled people to flourish and would not cost the earth.

In the work carried out from the first report we have reflected as a group on the Bridges (Inclusion) and Barriers (Exclusion) faced by disabled people throughout the diocese and through this report we suggest ways in which disabled people can be a part of a new, more diverse and interdependent body of Christ.

Diversity and Exclusion

During the life of this project three other reports have been received at General Synod focusing on the exclusion of other groups in the Church of England (IISCI report into Sexual Abuse, Living in Love and Faith, and From Lament to Action). Whilst the methods of exclusion for disabled people is not the same as these groups, we need to listen to all those experiences and try to see what lessons can be learnt and shared.

One important thing to notice is that people who have two or more protected characteristics often have very poor outcomes in society compared with people who are in only one group.

The processes of Exclusion

Whilst this report focuses on inclusion (and what to do about it!), it is important to look at how the power structures of exclusion often work. At their worst they shape the conversation as 'We (the powerful, engaged) wish to engage you (the outsiders) into our group'. This strongly suggests a dynamic of the 'us' welcoming the 'them'. However, as the disability working group demonstrates, this is a very unhelpful image. **They** (Disabled people) are already among **us** (the Church), whilst at the same time disabled people (**them**) are also excluded by the Church's practices and beliefs.

It should be noted that this report has used the language 'we/us' to refer to the Church, which is largely non-disabled, and they/them to refer to disabled people. This is to make it easier for readers to engage with it (as most readers will be church members – either disabled or non-disabled). However, for disabled people in the Church, this will inevitably strike a jarring note.

What is necessary for the Church to be less excluding is to move from a structure where, disabled people are expected to be dependent on and grateful for the pastoral care of the church, to a structure of interdependence.

To achieve this, it is not enough for the non-disabled people to lead and invite to 'their table'. A new space specifically needs to develop in which people can bring their experiences and begin to build new tables together. Importantly, this space needs to be initially shaped by the experiences of those who are excluded and overlooked, otherwise it will inevitably recreate the status quo.

Attitudes, Access & Agency

The Rev Tim Goode¹ Co-Chair of MOSAIC² wrote a blog (['Oi Vicar, Why Don't You Heal Yourself?' | ViaMedia.News](#)). In it he used the terms Attitudes, Access, and Agency. These resonated with the DIWG and have become the backbone of the structure of this report. We have looked at ways in which members of the Disability Inclusion Working Group are affected by the 'bridges and barriers' described and used them to help us shape the response we feel is necessary from the bishop's staff team, the Diocesan Synod and also from local Christian communities across the Diocese.

Attitudes

Jesus lived in a society that devalued the disabled and cast them out. When he met the blind man, he asked,

*"What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said, "I want to see."
Mark 10:51 – NIV*

Jesus put the needs and the lived experience of the disabled person at the centre of the encounter basing his response on the needs they expressed. He made no assumptions

¹ Revd Canon Timothy Goode, Rector of St Margaret's, Lee, Disability Adviser to the Diocese of Southwark, Member of Archbishop's Council and Co-Chair of MOSAIC

² Movement of Supporting Anglicans for an Inclusive Church

about what was needed, nor did he belittle the understanding and experience of the disabled person.

Our church communities often treat disabled people as one-dimensional caricatures, with only one identifiable characteristic (their 'disability'). This leads to a dehumanising experience for disabled people – where problems are solved **for** them and care is given **to** them.

People's expectations of disabled people often undermine their humanity, dignity, and identity. In this section we will describe some of the expectations that society puts onto disabled people, and discuss how churches sometimes add to these, making church an even harder place to be.

Access

Zacchaeus climbed into the tree to see Jesus pass by. He was disadvantaged by a crowd who chose not to make accommodations for him.

*When Jesus reached the spot,
he looked up and said (to him), 'Zacchaeus come down.'
Luke 19:1-10 – NIV*

This section looks at physical barriers to the inclusion of disabled people in our Christian communities. This includes church buildings, of course, but also looks at some of our community-building activities that often create barriers, not bridges. We also look at online content and Christian communities. These can offer a more accessible space and be great places for some disabled people to engage and lead.

The Baseline Report indicated that disabled people were less likely to be a part of our Christian communities, compared with wider society. We will look in this section at physical and practical policies, practicalities and structures that need addressing to face this challenge.

Agency

In the gospel reading about the Pharisee and the tax-collector the Pharisee, without any evidence, makes judgements about the motivation and experiences of the tax-collector. The introduction to the parable states:

*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down
on everyone else : Luke 18 v9 (NIV)*

This 'othering' of people is a very dangerous trait. It echoes the experiences of disabled people who are often told, 'I couldn't live like you do', or 'I'd rather die than be disabled' or how others often have very low expectations around what disabled people are capable of. Disabled people need to **lead** in our churches, responding to God's call on their lives and shaping the church to be as diverse as possible in the future.

This section examines the role of disabled people as ministers of new deeper understandings of God to the wider body of Christ. We look at ways to encourage disabled people to respond to God's good news and be that good news where they are. We look at the leadership of disabled people in the Church and some of the assumptions they may face, as well as thinking about how newer, more flexible shapes of modern Christian ministry might enable people to respond to God.

We will look at the role of disabled people as experts in their own needs and share stories of inclusion that puts disabled voices at the centre of decision making and planning.

Receiving and Responding to the challenges

It is our hope that the bishops and leaders in the diocese would feel able to clearly support the three challenges laid out in this document. They should then be discussed and received by the Diocesan synod and through them by deanery synods and church councils (or equivalent)

We have made 3 clear challenges, which this document will support and explain. They are;

Challenge 1 (Attitudes)	The Diocese of Derby wants to challenge and change all attitudes that limit the lives of disabled people in our churches and structures.
Challenge 2 (Access)	The Diocese of Derby wants to remove all barriers that stop disabled people engaging with church, both online and in our buildings.
Challenge 3 (Agency)	The Diocese of Derby wants to celebrate the lives of all disabled people and provide space for them to minister alongside others in response to God's love.

One of the main recommendations of this report is to set up and resource a Disability Inclusion Action Group (DIAG) to enable the Diocese and local churches to respond to the challenges and recommendations in this report.

This is essential as, because of the pandemic, we have currently been able to do very little in terms of the embedding of the ideas and sharing the learning we have been engaged in. A proposal for the shape of this group is set out at the end of the report.

Challenge 1 - Attitudes

Challenge 1 (Attitudes) **The Diocese of Derby wants to challenge and change all attitudes that limit the lives of disabled people in our churches and structures.**

Recommendations

- *To develop a Disability Inclusion Action Group to challenge the whole Diocese and embed the recommendations of this report into local church life.*
- *To provide a clear challenge to opinions that diminish disabled people's lives within churches in this diocese, by producing resources and training, especially about identity, healing and the hurt caused by unhelpful 'theologies' that blame sin and a lack of faith as the cause of illness and disability.*
- *To develop a team of preachers and speakers able to communicate at diocesan and local church services and events in ways that encourage disabled people in local congregations and challenge harmful interpretations of the Bible that limit disabled people.*
- *To develop our theological understanding of disability to benefit the DIAG group and the wider church. To listen to the experience of disabled people and reflect on what that teaches us about God and the nature of church that is striving to be 'Simpler, Humbler and Bolder'.*

As the introduction to this report shows, disabled people's role in society has been through a process of change over the past 50 years. UK society has been challenged by a revelation that disabled people are not simply people with problems to overcome and normalise but are equal members of society who have insights and expertise that benefit everyone when they are enabled to flourish.

However, attitudes that disabled people meet daily indicate that there is a long way to go before society fully enables them. Lack of choice, lack of freedom and lack of financial independence often leaves them disadvantaged, whilst unwillingness for systems to change and adapt for individuals creates barriers to work, community and support.

*The proportion of disabled people who reported feeling lonely "often or always" was nearly four times that of non-disabled people.
Disability, well-being and loneliness, UK: 2019 – Office of National Statistics*

In her book 'Crippled: austerity and the demonization of disabled people' Francis Ryan develops this understanding of how disabled people have come to be viewed. She shows how the recent years of austerity have changed the landscape for disabled people, moving many non-disabled people away from a caring, compassionate sense of support to an untrusting, underlying anger fuelled by a perception of disabled people as 'playing the system'.

*'British compassion for those who are suffering has been replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous approach.'
United Nations rapporteur Philip Alston – November 2018*

One thing that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown is that disabled people have been devastated by the choices made about disabled people and the value placed on them by politicians and people in the NHS and social care.

With 60% of all covid deaths being those of disabled people, a lack of clarity about how and when households should shield, and the horrendous use of 'Do not resuscitate' orders for people with learning disabilities without consent, the pandemic has hit disabled people hard. As we move on from the pandemic there is likely to be a rise in the number of disabled people suffering from 'long-covid' symptoms, and in people facing severe mental health challenges. We as a Church need to think deeply about how to respond to this in ways that reflect Jesus in the storm, not simply in the calm.

Assumptions within the Church

The assumption that most church members have about their own churches is that 'We welcome everyone and are really loving and caring', it even says 'everybody welcome on the banners!'. Those who experience church as a place of love, joy, peace, support, and care often find it really hard to understand that 'the church', for some people, is actually a harder place to exist in than wider society.

For disabled people the church has often been a place that provides cover for some very hurtful opinions and practices. Some of these occur because the attitudes of society go unchallenged within our church communities, and some occur because specific theologies and images of God are weaponised to control and blame disabled people for their own illnesses.

The following tweet from a (non-Christian) disabled lawyer sums up the painful beliefs the church sometimes colludes in,

Stranger outside of church: "Do you have faith? Have you repented for your sins? That is the first step to getting out of that wheelchair."

*Disabled people aren't sinful.
Disabled people aren't faithless.
Disability isn't a punishment.*

G H Mansfield tweet – June 13th 2021

Most disabled people that I have talked to over the past year have their own stories of unrequested prayer or Christians making assumptions about them, so when Christians engage with non-Christian disabled people there is a high likelihood that the disabled person's past experiences of church will have been negative. Unfulfilled promises, lack of listening to their experiences and a sense of God being interested only in their healing rather than their identity, all play their part. This needs clear, regular and supportive challenge from church leaders in their sermons and church life.

Unhelpful Theology

Disability and Sin

Some Christian Interpretations of the Bible have historically often been used to find a link between a person's disability and perceived sin. This comes from reading the texts of the Bible without engaging with the fact that these originate in a culture where disability and sin were perceived of as two sides of the same coin.

Disabled people in Jesus' time were separated, ostracised from social and religious groups. Jesus, through his healings brought people back into relationship with God and neighbours and to wholeness in community. Traditional interpretations of these stories usually underline the importance of the 'fixing' or normalising of the broken person, but not of re-joining to the people of God. For example, the healing of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19) is a story about healing, but that healing provides a way for the men to reconnect with the community which is where their wholeness is found. In a modern, inclusive culture where the separation of disabled people from society is more often seen as wrong, we need to re-evaluate the ways in which we look at both healing and meeting with those on the outside of society and be very careful that we don't judge and exclude.

Charity and care

The biblical instruction to provide care for the poor and the needy, and the historical connections between Disabled people and poverty, provided the church with a clear mandate to provide for disabled people and their needs. While a call for justice for all is a central part of our Christian life together, without listening and responding to individuals, there is a danger that a culture of charity will damage Christians' engagement with disabled people.

This ministry to disabled people, however well-meaning, leads to an expectation that disabled people should become dependent on, and be grateful for, any provision made for them.

The challenge from the disabled community is that this dependency relegates disabled people to a less than human role. The fight for social justice and independence for disabled people is a major challenge to the charity model in which the church finds itself so entrenched.

When disabled people are enabled to take part in, help with and even lead our communities, the effect is transformative to all involved. Disabled people being able to offer love and care for others enables God's blessing to be experienced in new and fresh ways. This simple reversal of the usual power balances provides fresh ways for the Holy Spirit to be experienced within the church.

Identity and language

In Appendix One there is an explanation of terms and language around describing disabled people, but when we are thinking about attitudes, we want to make two points.

- 1) To exclude disabled people simply because nobody in your congregation chooses to use the word disabled is not a valid excuse. Anyone severely disadvantaged in day-to-day life because of their impairment (long-term illness or condition), is, from the perspective of the Equality Act (2010), a disabled person. Even if they do not use that language to self-identify, we still need to make sure (as best we can) that they are not disadvantaged by the Christian communities they engage with. This can also enable others, who are not disabled but are struggling with aspects of their health, to connect better with the church's life.
- 2) Disabled people often, but not always, see their disability as a part of their identity. When non-disabled people try to separate the 'real' person from the disability it is insulting and damaging. Disabled people are called to respond to God (see Chapter 4) as they are and that's where God meets them and journeys with them. If we act as though someone needs to become entirely different person before God can work with them, it is a sure way to push people away from their faith.

Although this report advocates and uses the term 'disabled people' it is important to listen and reflect the language used by individuals to describe their impairments and the effect this has on them. We need to make sure we provide enabling, inclusive environments, in which disabled people can respond to God's call.

Healing and Cure

One potential positive tool for many disabled people is separating the experience of healing from the experience of cure. This is discussed in depth in the booklet written by the disabled Christians' organisation, Disability and Jesus, 'Pilgrims in the Dark'.

Cure is a cessation of all symptoms. The person becomes well again; all impairments disappear. Miraculous cures happen very, very infrequently. For many disabled people, the hope of cure becomes burdensome and for many autistic people the concept of cure is a stripping of their identity and insulting to their understanding of themselves.

Healing, on the other hand, happens when we meet with the God who connects with us on a deep level and brings changes. These rarely match our expectations but are special and helpful staging points in our journey with God. Not all will be cured – but potentially, all can be healed.

When non-disabled people focus all their conversations with disabled people on cure there is a strong implication that God cannot meet them where they are. When linked to the common understanding of Bible texts on healing this can emphasise lay too much emphasis on the 'need to be fixed' too much. This disenfranchises disabled people who may be very aware of God's involvement in their current lives.

Challenge 2 – Access

Challenge 2 (Access) **The Diocese of Derby wants to remove all barriers that stop disabled people engaging with church, both online and in our buildings.**

Recommendations

- *To develop a link between the advisory group and the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) as a resource for churches undertaking physical changes to help them include the needs of disabled people.*
- *To develop a local ‘Access Audit’ process to enable local churches to look at all aspects of access in their buildings and give help to prioritise a range of options to follow.*
- *To investigate grants and internal budgets to fund an access budget for regular diocesan processes and to support the ongoing work and administration of the Disability Inclusion Action Group (DIAG)³.*

Access within society

The ‘social model’ of disability is an understanding of disability that encourages disabled people to refocus their ‘disability’ or impairment, through a wider social lens. It provides a way to ask of society, what is it that disables me? What causes me to have to overcome and battle obstacles that are put in my way, that other people don’t even notice?⁴

It has had an impact on disabled people’s identity within society and is helpful within the church context too. It is the model that gave us the title for this report, ‘The Disabling Church...’. Acknowledging the number of barriers that are caused by the way the world is designed around people without impairments is a good way of highlighting and bringing about change.

It is also helpful to realise that disabled people consistently must manage these excluding situations contending with a huge range of barriers that are often unseen by non-disabled people. According to a one explanation of the social model of disability, the barriers to inclusion are **environmental, organisational, communicational and attitudinal**.⁵

So even before disabled people reach our church communities, they will have had to overcome many other obstacles. The positive outcomes of this are threefold.

1. Disabled people are experienced at facing different types of barriers to inclusion.
2. Disabled people know what help they need as they are the experts in their needs.
3. Disabled people are usually great problem-solvers and can help fix barriers if they are listened to.

³ The Disability Inclusion Action Group (DIAG) forms the method for embedding findings and the recommendations of this report. Details can be found at the end of this report

⁴ Social Model of Disability – SCOPE ([Social model of disability | Disability charity Scope UK](#))

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_model_of_disability

Access within Church

Buildings

Over this project, we have communicated with individual Church Leaders and the DAC. Three of us have taken a course in access auditing and we have had many discussions on the variety of church buildings we, as disabled people, worship in.

We feel that it is important to help local churches as they try to adapt their churches buildings to make them more accessible. Some of these are obviously potentially very costly with ramp access and accessible toilets needing to be added efficiently and sensitively. Some changes are simply a matter of creating a quiet space for those who may need it or making sure signs and directions are clear and readable.

As a diocese we should begin by focusing on several local lead churches to give them advice on accessibility and develop a process that can work with the DAC to help provide access audits as part of any substantial building or renovation projects.

There are a number of key things to hold in mind when local churches look to develop their buildings. These include:

- The fact that no single event or building is ever accessible to everyone.
- Adaptability and listening are often the most important factors in inclusion.
- Disabled people are excellent problem-solvers for themselves, so involve them at the beginning and while planning reorganisations.
- Wheelchair users are 8% of disabled people, so remember to consider other impairments too.
- Seek advice on developing inclusive spaces for disabled people from external agencies.

Including local people in planning stages

From an access point of view, the initial conversation for any development of buildings or their use be with local disabled people. This may include disabled people in the church community but should also include engagement with disabled people and organisations within the wider parish or group that the church serves.

Disabled people feel valued if they are engaged at the beginning of project, rather than being added as an afterthought (which is a common experience). The Disability Inclusion Action Group (DIAG) will be able to provide support for Christian communities to engage with people with who have a wider experience of different impairments and how they might affect engagement with church projects.

It is important that the working group begins to develop a relationship with the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC). In some other dioceses no major project can be carried out without an access audit process. Whether this, or another solution, is the most appropriate for this diocese should be discussed as the relationship between the groups grows.

Digital

The growth of 'Online' and 'Hybrid' church

During the covid-19 pandemic many churches took their worship and ministry to one another online. This has provided 'Accidental Access'⁶. Unfortunately, many churches have rejoiced that this has made them more accessible without considering who might have now been excluded. In reality, they have simply become more accessible to a specific group of disabled people for a limited period of time.

The close connection between poverty and disability means that many disabled people will not have the resources to engage with this form of Church. Also, when churches moved online, many groups failed to investigate captioning and signing and therefore simply repeated online many of the problems of on-site worship and communication.

Some groups have developed worship specifically led by disabled people and those affected by disability in their families. One good example of this is 'Disability and Jesus' with their weekly worship led by Rev Katie Tupling and Rev Bill Bravnier. Other regular times for worship and reflection have been led by members of the Disability Inclusion Working Group. Lynda and Sarah (from the DIWG) have both produced daily prayers which reach way beyond our diocese.

Our dream would be that a national solution to an inclusive online church would be found to support some of these disabled Christian groups financially so that they can provide high quality worship using the capacity and skills of disabled people in a way that could focus on people who are unable, either temporarily or permanently, to engage with onsite church in a building. This could work with other online churches and local parishes to provide church from home. This visionary idea, beyond the remit of this report would need the funding of all dioceses, or the central church.

List of Practical Adaptations for online worship

Captioning

Zoom meetings can all be captioned (this is possible, on request, even with the free version). The captions can make meetings accessible to d/Deaf and neurodivergent people, among other disabled people helpful support. Captions should be the default setting, and people should be told how to remove them if they find them distracting.

Clear use of Text

For certain groups, communication by the written word (text, chat or email) is preferable to the spoken word. When communicating online with someone a conversation about the best way to do this should always take place early on. There may be a difference between a preference - where other alternatives can also work - and an accommodation - something that needs to be done. Different access needs can also sometimes conflict, so therefore understanding the needs of all concerned is vital.

Managed meetings and discussions

Whilst there are great benefits to being reactive and responsive communities, we need to recognise that the ability just to do things on the spur of the moment is a privilege that often excludes disabled people. There is a fine balance between focusing on someone's

⁶ Naomi Lawson-Jacobs – 'Shut in, Shut out, Shut up' webinar

impairments when deciding what to do, thus singling them out, and ignoring their needs - thereby deciding to do something that excludes them.

Whilst this is sometimes unavoidable in church life, meetings, training, and worship may need extra planning and preparation. As a young autistic boy, Isaac, put it, 'I hate it when they make plans and then think how we can make this better for people with different kinds of needs. We should design it for everyone from the start and not waste anyone's time.'⁷

Diocesan Structures

Synods

In a General Synod in July 2007 a motion was carried that read,

That this Synod affirm the value of the contribution made by clergy with disabilities in the life and witness of the Church of England and its commitment to and support for their ministry by asking dioceses to:

- (a) take note of the report 'Disabled Clergy in the Church of England' and the outcome of this debate;*
- (b) ensure that a "lead" person on disability issues is appointed in each diocese and that appropriate training is made available; and*
- (c) ensure that disability issues are made an integral part of the functioning of diocesan structures, particularly diocesan advisory committees, and parsonage boards.*

In the diocese of Derby, since 2007, we have had a few part-time unpaid advisors and an occasional chaplain for the Deaf church. This has provided some support for clergy, and advice for others with specific requests, but has not lived up to the promises made at the General Synod.

The DIWG believes that the best way, long term, to embed the lessons of this report and provide support to disabled people, whilst at the same time providing a broad range of advice, encouragement, and inclusion across the diocese, would be for a group of disabled people and others to work together with a part-time paid person leading and supporting them. A diocesan advisor role is the best way to develop this work, especially as that provides a link to the best practice of other dioceses. Funding for this should be investigated and included in any future diocesan bids for funding as mission with and to disabled people is a part of the whole mission of the diocese and it's vision for a more diverse Diocese

If this were not possible, a resourced Disability Inclusion Action Group (DIAG) led by a volunteer chair and supported by a senior staff champion and an officer from within the diocesan structure would provide the highest chance of bringing the outcomes of this report to fruition.

⁷ This quote came from twitter when Isaac's mum was tweeting for 'Our CofE'. She was, with his permission, writing down his thoughts as an autistic child about Church.

Central Finances and Budgets

Local churches are expected to provide accessibility adaptations for each of their buildings. This is a difficult burden for them to carry as it is unevenly spread amongst different places facing varying challenges.

However, when churches come together as deaneries and even dioceses, there are no funds set aside to provide accessible support for those who need it. Doing this on an ad-hoc basis has become a structural barrier to disabled people.

We feel that there is therefore a need for an agreed budget to provide Disability Inclusion support for diocesan structures. Trying to secure such a budget is vital to stop a case-by-case process of inclusion, which is both excluding and uncomfortable to manage. This budget should also include funds to support the work of the Disability Inclusion Action Group as well as providing a way for access needs to be addressed quickly when necessary

Challenge 3 - Agency

Challenge 3 (Agency) **The Diocese of Derby wants to celebrate the lives of all disabled people and provide space for them to minister alongside others in response to God's love.**

Recommendations

- *To provide resources for several events to happen each year for disabled people to meet and respond to God.*
- *To encourage and provide challenge and support for Diocesan discernment processes to deepen the understanding of and increase the proportion of disabled leaders in the church. Disabled people should be represented in these processes.*
- *To develop a way for disabled people to raise feedback on their inclusion and exclusion, both locally and at diocesan level.*

Discipleship

Specific

There is little in our diocese specifically aimed at developing the gifts, spiritual life and call of disabled people. It is important that disabled people with shared impairments and experiences are helped to meet and provide care and fellowship with one another. For example, Deaf Church in Derby, Carers and People with learning disabilities.

One of the great successes of the Disability Inclusion Working Group has been the speed at which we have become a support and an educational opportunity for one another. As disabled Christians, we have a shared experience of being disadvantaged by society and the churches that we connect with and have become very creative and inventive at responding to them. However, we also discovered that we had different experiences of exclusion based on the variety of impairments we live with. This has been a wonderfully affirming and healing process. It is important to find a way to build a network to replicate this in a wider context across deaneries or the diocese.

Through the work of the Holding Space community in Chesterfield, Struggling Saints has led a couple of meetings and a Twitter account has helped some disabled people connect and be affirmed as they are in their relationship and experience of God. This, and other online groups provide spaces for many disabled people to meet with God. Solace, which is another part of Holding Space, is providing a similar place for carers. Carers were not covered directly by this report but will be a vital voice to connect with in future.

In the whole of Church Life

The leadership of pioneer communities across the diocese has regularly considered how we develop and disciple Christians individually and as communities. This draws on listening and responding to small groups and individuals and tailoring our response to them. This could be a great help to disability inclusion as it is flexible and responsive. However disabled people are often likely to be in hard-to-reach groups that may not be the first that the planting or pioneering team meet. Frustratingly this can make our new congregations just as disabling as churches that meet in ancient buildings.

Christian communities with set structures in their church life, for example confirmation, house groups, Bible studies and Lent & and Advent courses, or social events developed

over years, often follow predefined patterns of meetings. Wherever they are based, this impacts how accessible they are to disabled people. A willingness for groups to change times, or venues, or the media used, can make a big difference for disabled people. In her PHD thesis on Disabled People's experiences in churches Naomi Lawson Jacobs referred to this practice as 'Cultural Exclusion'⁸

Unfortunately, because of this cultural exclusion, it is very likely that disabled people who are members of congregations or at the edge of our Christian communities, are less likely to be actively recruited into the leadership of the rest of church life, which means they will not be involved in planning. Often the expectation is that disabled people need only to be able to engage with worship. However, this is not the full experience of being a part of the Body of Christ and such an expectation assumes disabled people require less than others and have less to offer.

In sermons and cultural expectations

Many cultures within our churches emphasise and underline specific understandings of health, illness, sin, forgiveness, and disability (see Unhelpful Theology above.). These understandings can be explicit and spoken but are also often found within a community's shared beliefs.

One of these is the culture that Tim Rourke refers to as 'echoes of the 'prosperity gospel''. Many people come to faith, or find their faith strengthened, through periods of adversity. This is a common story that should be celebrated and shared as it is collectively very important for our understanding of God's hope. However, this attitude can cause a problem when hope is seen **only** through the removal of negative events in the past. It can emphasise and even create the myth that God is seen only in the 'fixing' of problems. This is untrue and very problematic to disabled people, as opposed to those experiencing temporary illness.

These, and other repeated examples of God overcoming our struggles, can build up a communal misunderstanding of the link between disability and sin or lack of faith. If left unchecked, this can become a huge added pressure when someone in that community becomes ill. In many cases disabled people can conclude, without anyone explicitly saying so, that they are responsible for their disability, and when God doesn't step in, the only person left to blame is themselves.

Discussing disability and identity openly and seeing disabled people in our churches as leaders or active members helps to undermine that cycle of blame and breaks the spoken or communal belief that your disability is related to your behaviour or lack of faith.

Leadership

The shape of licensed and ordained ministry

One of the most disabling factors in the development of people's response to a call to ordained and lay leadership in the church is the expectations placed on ministers to fit the presumed shape of ministries that the church expects. This fails to take account of many people who minister as self-supporting ministers or who serve the church alongside other work and family, especially as Readers and people in other forms of leadership.

⁸ 'The Upside-down Kingdom of God: A Disability Studies Perspective on Disabled People's Experiences in Churches and Theologies of Disability – Naomi Lawson Jacobs

After discussing this topic with several of the disability advisors around the country there emerges a strong suspicion which looks something like this: the expectation that ordination leads to a full-time, (6 days per week) highly-challenging workload. This clashes with the assumptions that disabled people would not be able to fulfil that role. This generalisation is not true of all disabled people, and people with certain impairments appear to be less disabled by the ordained discernment process than others.

However, because disabled people are often problem-solvers, their expertise and identity as disabled people needs to be placed centrally and positively in the process of discernment. Questions around disability and identity need to be handled in a far more inclusive way than they currently are.

Canon Law and an unequal system

During the writing of this report, we were concerned to discover that canon C4 3 still states,

No person shall be admitted into holy orders who is suffering, or who has suffered from, any physical or mental infirmity which in the opinion of the bishop will prevent him from ministering the word and sacraments of or from performing the other duties of the minister's office.⁹

Historically, this canon has been at the heart of the designing of processes around ordination. The problem is that it normalises the assumption that people 'who have suffered (or are suffering) from any physical or mental infirmity' (which includes disabled people and others) should have to prove that their impairments will not be a barrier to their ability to minister. It is difficult to prove a negative. It would be much better to start with the assumption that candidates applying for ordination believe that they have been called by God, as they are and are working with them to discover a ministry that is their shaped.

In terms of the models of disability this canon makes the central mistake of the medical model by separating out the disabled person from their impairments and treating them as distinct when in fact they are completely integrated.

Having this extra burden of proof placed on disabled people raises serious concerns and places bishops in a very difficult position. It means that disabled people may not be able to develop their ministry as the person they know themselves to be and it may encourage them to mask their conditions or minimise the challenges they face. As one person reflected when discussing this on twitter, 'It gives the bishop an easy out to say "No" when it should be a, "Yes – and we'll adapt as needs be."

This canon also overlooks the need for resilient people who know how to manage the struggles that all ministry can throw at you. People who have been through mental or physical health challenges are usually protected by knowing the signs that may trigger further events. This canon sees disability only as a negative experience which weakens the assumed capabilities of the 'sufferer'.

In our opinion this, and other parts of the ordination discernment process, indicate a potential structural 'ableism'. More research into ordination and disability by the national church is desperately needed.

⁹ Canon C4 3 – Canons of the Church of England

Shaping ministry around groups of people

One of the greatest opportunities of the new diocesan vision is aspiring to a large increase in church leadership across the diocese. This increase in numbers and the opportunities offered, by both pioneering and creative responses within established churches, will be a chance to develop ministries shaped around leadership teams and individuals, rather than forcing leadership teams to continue to prop up old shapes of church ministry.

The ability to create differently-shaped forms of church also offers great opportunities for disabled (and non-disabled) people to develop and grow as ministers in their response to God. The variety of ministry shapes that will be required in future provides a chance to help those who may previously have been overlooked to be central to the growth of the diocese and local church.

Developing a deeper Understanding of God

The benefit of including a diversity of people in the body of Christ is seen often as a moral imperative, the 'right thing' to do. This can be problematic as it plays into the model of charity and kindness and welcoming in the 'other'. This sees the generous giver as the hero and the poor disabled person as the receiver, and if you are not thankful and contrite, you are often portrayed as awkward and bitter.

If we turn this around and simply assume that all people are made in the image of God, and that all people reflect that image to one another, then disabled people, have a role to play in broadening our shared experience of God. Disabled voices will highlight aspects of God to others that non-disabled people will not realise as easily without them.

Hearing our stories

Challenge

Disabled people are often seen as problems to be overcome. They are not people whose needs are not being met, but exceptions that force us to change. This can create very disheartened, disabled people and their families who raise the issues, sometimes with great frustration, and feel that they are not heard.

As a diocese and as local churches we need to be resourced to hear what is being said and, through the Disability Inclusion Action Group (DIAG), provide expertise and support in finding solutions both for local churches and for disabled people who present a challenge.

Complaints

A more formal procedure for hearing complaints would be a positive target to move towards. Whilst complaints often put us on the defensive, receiving and responding (or explaining why we can't yet respond) is a way for the diocese to show they are truly listening. Managing situations where people have been excluded and providing information and support for all involved should be tied into the Diocesan Complaints Procedure, which needs improving.

Compliments

The organisation 'Through the Roof' has a celebration of 'Disabled-friendly church' and issue certificates to churches which provide excellent support for disabled people. Two of the members of the DIWG work with that organisation, so this could be a way to encourage a church when specific actions are taken.

It may also be a useful target to develop our own certificate for churches that undergo an 'access audit', have a disabled people's champion and are developing the discipleship and

leadership of disabled people within their congregations. These churches could act as beacons for others to discover how being more inclusive to disabled people to benefit the whole church.

The Way Forward

Implementing the Diocesan Vision

Transforming Lives

New disabled disciples are an essential part of a growing church that is inclusive for disabled (and other) people. Barriers to engagement highlighted in this report need to be challenged and faced. If the current rate of disabled people in the population were factored into the hoped-for figure in the vision we would expect 1000 (1 in 5) new disabled disciples to respond to Christ.

The questions this raises are: Would our congregations be ready for that? Would their attitudes to these new people be disabling or enabling? Would the local churches and the Diocesan be willing to resource access needs for them all? Also, how would we cope with those disabled people being called by God into leadership in the church (both lay – 200 out of 1000 and ordained – 10 out of 50) and can we say yes to them, and make the changes necessary, or will it be a 'No, Sorry' again?

Growing Church

As new Christian communities develop, we need to be very careful not simply to replicate the attitudes, access and lack of agency currently found in our communities. Unless they spend time reflecting on who is excluded, new congregations will continue to provide for the assumed needs of disabled people without listening to them. They will be places of care, compassion, and love, but also of low expectations and dehumanising behaviours.

In every new community we need to include the challenge of always becoming more inclusive to disabled people (and other groups). We should be wary of the bland 'everyone welcome' and be specific about how we, as individual Christian communities, and collectively as churches within the diocese, are flexible enough to enable everyone to find their place in the body of Christ.

Building community

As we respond in the public arena to the injustices of poverty, stigmatisation, identity, hate, fear and isolation in the UK and the world, we need to be clear in the language we use about the effect of these things on the lives of disabled people and those who love, support and care for them. The links between disability, poverty and low educational expectations are strong, but they are not automatic or just.

The expectations placed on disabled people make overcoming the disabling structures of society even more difficult, and the media tropes of 'superhero' or 'pitiabile people' make disabled people's ordinary lives more difficult to manage.

When the church works together with other organisations in the community to bring about change, we need to examine our shared attitudes to disabled people and be willing to be examined. Even when the recipients of care are disabled people, we need to be brave enough to ask, 'How many of the decision-makers are disabled people or those who support them directly?' 'How many disabled people's voices are heard in the practices and procedures in place?' and 'How willing are our partners (or ourselves) to change our practices too?'

We need to build community with others, including disabled people, to discover with them what the Good News of Jesus is for them. We need to know that in our ways of engaging, our values give insight into how the kingdom of God is coming near to us all.

Redressing Numerical Imbalance

The Baseline Report indicated that an estimated percentage of disabled people in the churches is around 10%. This figure was attained by asking church leaders to use the Equalities Act definition and to apply it to their congregations.

A conservative estimate of disabled people is that they represent 16-20% of the UK population. At the average age of Church of England attenders (Approx. 60-65) the level rises to 45%.

This figure alone shows that disabled people are less likely to be involved in the life of our churches. With the recent diocesan vision being announced, several things need to be addressed in our desire to grow more Christian communities.

- 1) Disability Inclusion requires conscious thought. Without that it is very easy to replicate excluding forms of church.
- 2) Disability Inclusion requires receiving and responding to the experiences of disabled people. Disabled people need to be involved and listened to and changes need to happen.
- 3) Disability Inclusion requires hard work, but not necessarily costly work: normalising inclusion takes focus, intent, and effort.
- 4) It is not possible to plan for every person or make any event open to all – all Christian communities must be encouraged to make changes to keep improving over time. Together we can welcome everyone, individually our churches simply cannot do so.
- 5) Disability inclusion broadens the diversity of the body of Christ. It is valuable to everyone and ultimately helps us learn more about the nature of God.

Embedding for the future

Developing Current Reach

This project makes recommendations to the Bishops and Diocese of ways to increase the inclusion of disabled people within the whole of the diocese of Derby. The way to do this is to emphasise and build on the bridges we have found to enhance inclusion and to challenge and remove the barriers that lead to the exclusion of disabled people.

The Baseline Report showed that disabled people are under-represented in our churches against the figures for the general population, and that adaptations for access are not the main driver for this discrepancy.

There are strong expectations in society that disabled people should be cared for and looked after and disabled people are not valued as equals or leaders. This is replicated in the churches where disabled access to decision-making processes have often not been considered (even though access to the congregation in worship may well have been). 'Folk-religious' theories around the cause of disability within the churches often connects disability with sin or lack of faith, and whilst this is not regularly preached from the pulpit, it is not often clearly preached against. This ambiguity around disability theology causes many problems for disabled people within congregations.

Staged Process for change

Many changes are needed to make Derby Diocese a safer, welcoming, resourced space for disabled people. The challenges for the diocese as a whole mirror those faced by many of our traditional church buildings. It may be felt that there is too much to do, and that beginning on this road would mean too many changes and too much disruption.

However, not to start on this journey indicates that we are a church failing to engage with the disabled community in this part of the UK as they continue to expect to be valued and heard. As disabled people begin to take part in the decision-making of the world in which we live and to be treated more often as equally a part of the diversity of humanity, the church, as the body of Christ, must respond. Questions that deeply resonate with a God who loves **all**, is reflected in **all**, and gives life to **all** that reflect his image in them must be answered.

This report recommends the setting up of a permanent Disability Inclusion Action Group to help keep the Diocese, Synods and local churches answerable to the challenges contained within it.

Such a group does not currently exist and will need focused time and effort to develop and to connect it into the rest of the diocesan structures. This needs a leader committed to building a strong team with sufficient capacity and integration to make a difference. Tim will be working hard on this role over the next 6 months to shape and start the action group.

However, we still believe that to make the greatest ongoing difference to the lives of disabled people in this diocese – people who continue to be hurt and shunned by the church - a process to employ a part-time disability advisor should be investigated. Having a point of focus would improve the work of the Action Group, provide clearer advice and support for local churches and give time to continued engagement with the national church and learning from other diocesan experiences.

Provisional suggestions for the Disability Inclusion Action Group

Aims

Assuming that the diocese is willing to take on the challenges issued earlier in this document, we suggest that these should be used as the initial aims of the Disabled People's Working Group.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Aim 1
(Attitudes) | to challenge and change all attitudes that limit the lives of disabled people in our churches and structures. |
| Aim 2
(Access) | to remove all barriers that stop disabled people engaging with church, both online and in our buildings. |
| Aim 3
(Agency) | to celebrate the lives of all disabled people and provide space for them to minister alongside others in response to God's love. |

Identifying Members and Roles

- Disabled people from around the diocese
- Carers of disabled adults and children
- Archdeacon or Bishop for communication to and from diocesan structures

- Board of Education – Linking with Schools re inclusion and ‘British values’¹⁰.
- Admin / Secretarial Support

This group should be as diverse as possible – Race, Sexuality, Gender, Socio-economic etc. It will need an able chair and vice-chair who are able to communicate and organise.

The admin and/or technical role(s) are needed to manage and run meetings and events with complex communication needs, as clear preparation and planning of meetings is essential to make them as inclusive as possible.

Suggested Annual Running Costs for the Action Group

The working group will largely be led by volunteers, but there will be some costs, (Yr 1 assumes 2 events growing to 4 in year 3) and 6 action group meetings online

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Hall Hire	£300	£450	£600
Refreshments	£72	£108	£148
External Speaker	£500	£500	£500
Travel Expenses	£50	£75	£100
Either Interpreter or Captioner	£1320	£1320	£1320
Diocesan Synod Captions / Interpreter (3 Meetings)	£1200	£1200	£1200
Total	£3442	£3653	£3868

On top of these costs there will be the need for a Chair, and admin/technical support (which could be a paid role (1day per week). This means that meetings of the action group can be run online and the events (Study, Retreat, Encouragement days) can run in person, or in a hybrid format.

One of the key tasks of the group would be to investigate grant funding for these roles or provide evidence for Strategic Transformation or Development Fund grant applications for the diocese.

Terms of Reference

These need to be agreed as the group develops together but would usefully include the recommendations from this report.

Attitude

- *To develop a Disability Inclusion Action Group to challenge the whole Diocese and embed the recommendations of this report into local church life.*
- *To provide a clear challenge to opinions that diminish disabled people’s lives within churches in this diocese, by producing resources and training, especially about identity, healing and the hurt caused by unhelpful ‘theologies’ that blame sin and a lack of faith as the cause of illness and disability.*

¹⁰ British Values – are a part of the National Curriculum in all schools where diversity, inclusion and respect for all people are taught. A potential engagement with this may be beneficial to our churches.

- *To develop a team of preachers and speakers able to communicate at diocesan and local church services and events in ways that encourage disabled people in local congregations and challenge harmful interpretations of the Bible that limit disabled people.*
- *To develop our theological understanding of disability to benefit the group and the wider church. To listen to the experience of disabled people and reflect on what that teaches us about God and the nature of church that is striving to be 'Simpler, Humbler and Bolder'.*

Access

- *To develop a link between the advisory group and the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) as a resource for churches undertaking physical changes to help them include the needs of disabled people.*
- *To develop a local 'Access Audit' process to enable local churches to look at all aspects of access in their buildings and give help to prioritise a range of options to follow.*
- *To investigate grants and internal budgets to fund an access budget for regular diocesan processes and to support the ongoing work and administration of the Disability Inclusion Action Group (DIAG).*

Agency

- *To provide resources for several events to happen each year for disabled people to meet with God and respond. This may start with one or two but would aim to grow to four separate resourced day events by 2024.*
- *To encourage and provide challenge and support for Diocesan discernment processes to deepen the understanding of and increase the proportion of disabled leaders in the church. Disabled people should be represented in these processes.*
- *To develop a way for disabled people to raise feedback on their inclusion and exclusion, both locally and at diocesan level.*

Other Possible Priorities

- *Providing and creating accessible training modules on various aspects of disability and the disabling church. Help all other training to be developed accessibly.*
- *Developing resources to help churches listen to disabled people, Signpost to organisations and groups that listen to and enable disabled people.*
- *Encouraging regular engagement groups for disabled Christians across the diocese*
- *To provide theological rigour to decisions made by the Diocese of Derby.*
- *To provide clear, quick advice to the leadership of the Diocese of Derby around disabled people and the issues they face*
- *To develop a Disabled Person friendly church scheme that highlights churches that have had an 'access audit', have a people's champion on the church council and are developing the leadership of disabled people in their church. These could be beacons for others to follow*