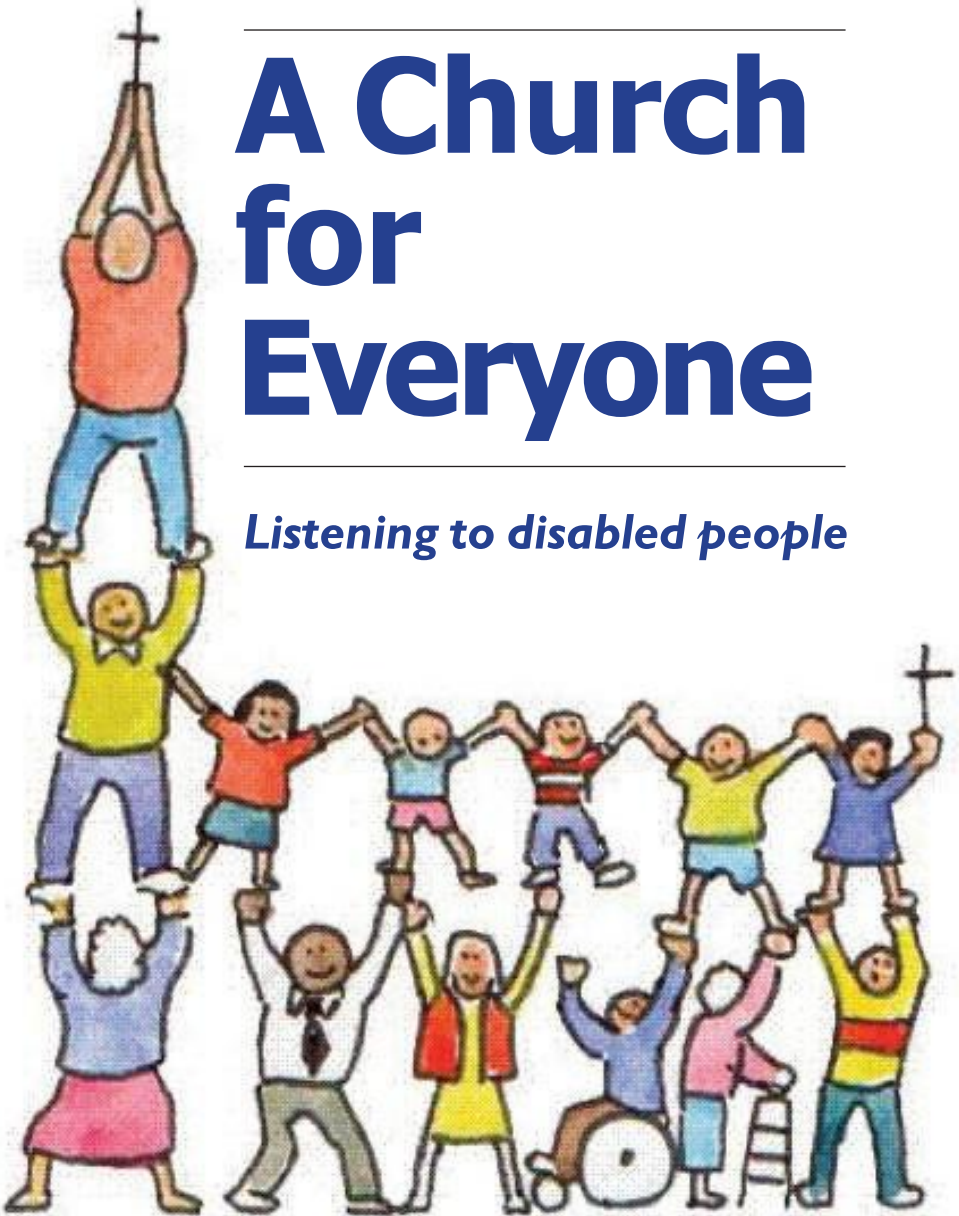

A Church for Everyone

Listening to disabled people



This booklet was produced as part of the Anglican Dorchester Deanery Mission Plan.

A working group met in 2016-17 to develop some guidelines and resources for our churches to ensure that disabled people can play a full part in the life of their church community and truly belong.

The group members were Rev Claire McClelland, Hazel Morgan (chair), Dick Corbett-Winder, Peter and Jackie Higgins, Katrina Randall and Andy Morgan. They all either have direct experience of disability or a special interest in the lives of disabled people.

They listened to people from different churches to find out what they enjoy about being part of a church community and what could be improved. They especially wanted to thank Tony and Liz Castleton, Margaret Cundy, Rev Jo Haine, Sally Montague-Johnstone, Pauline Sampson, Kate Woodhouse and members of People First Dorset: James Carter, Diane Childs, Nesta Oram and William Parmiter. They were very grateful to all of them for sharing their knowledge and experience.

In 2025 the booklet has been updated.



Introduction

'Many people have difficulties participating fully in church life as a result of barriers that could often be resolved following good advice and reflection.'
(www.salisbury.anglican.org)

This booklet reflects what some disabled people¹ and others close to them have said about

- what they value as members of the church
- what they find difficult
- what could be improved

It is a starting point for thinking about what it means to belong to the church community. It has been produced primarily for the clergy, lay pastoral assistants, churchwardens and members of Parochial Church Councils (PCCs) within the Dorchester Deanery but we also hope it will be used much more widely.

Then disabled people can play a full part in the life of their church community, have their contribution valued and truly belong.

The booklet signposts to other resources. We have information boxes with useful organisations, websites, email addresses and phone numbers.

Belonging to the church community

'Always ask us what we like.'

Why don't we see more disabled people in some of our churches?

It is estimated that 24 percent of the population in the UK live with a disability. ([UK disability statistics: Prevalence and life experiences - House of Commons Library](#))

Some churches are very welcoming. Others say that they do not have any people living with disability in their congregations.

We often think that making a church accessible is about adapting buildings. It is about more than that. We need also to take into account the needs of those who live with hidden disabilities (for example those who live with chronic pain or are neurodivergent). They may be overlooked.

¹The term disabled people is used widely, for example by the Disability Rights UK whose members believe that so often people are disabled by external barriers within our society which undermine their well-being. Others prefer to say people with disabilities or people who live with a disability as it emphasises the person. We shall use terms sparingly as we do not like labels.

The law can take us so far. Thankfully we now have laws to protect people from being discriminated against because of their experience of disability. Churches need to observe the terms of the Equality Act 2010 and make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to enable disabled people to play a full part. This means that as far as possible they need to remove obstacles that stop people participating. As is often said it is about much more than ramps and hearing loops. For example, it can be about communicating in a way that is helpful to all people.

There are some useful guidelines and audits to decide whether your church is doing what the law says. (See pp 14 and 15)

We need to go beyond the law.

Listening to people

‘Everyone is an individual and people may have different views.’

We need to prepare our churches not only for those who already belong to our congregations but also for those who may join us. We can reach out into the community. How about inviting someone along to a church event or to a service? Each person will be different. Each church community will want to make changes according to their congregation’s needs.

There are several organisations that support churches with information about including people better.

Through the Roof provides a range of information www.throughtheroof.org
Alpha House, Alpha Place, Garth Road, Morden, Surrey SM4 4TQ

Tel. 01372 749955 Email info@throughtheroof.org

Churches for All: A network of UK Christian disability organisations
churchesforall.org.uk

Inclusive church inclusive-church.org

There is more information about the lives of disabled people and services to meet their needs on government and local government websites.

For general information about rights and services www.gov.uk/browse/disabilities

For information and resources from the Church of England churchsupporthub.org/all-resources/barrier-free-belonging/

For information about services for disabled people provided by Dorset County Council dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

For a list of clubs and organisations for disabled people in Dorset ableize.com/disabled-groups-and-clubs-by-county/dorset/

Supporting people with hearing impairments

Some people will be hard of hearing; others may be deaf. We need to provide what is appropriate for each person. People will have different ways of communicating. Some use a hearing aid and loop, others British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters or signers, some lip read. Some may use more than one of these ways.

- Always speak clearly, not too fast and maintain eye contact.
- Each church needs to have a properly working loop system, with people who understand its importance taking responsibility for ensuring it works properly; for example that the batteries are all properly charged.
- The lighting, a plain background, where people stand, not obscuring the mouth - these are all important and especially for a lip reader.
- It is difficult when leaders have their back to the congregation.
- Leaders, readers and intercessors need training in using the microphone. Those who wear a hearing aid can help with this.
- What about saying the main topic that is going to be talked about next, to give a lip reader or signer an indication of what is to follow?
- There may be signers who attend one of the churches in the area who may be prepared to sign for occasional services. It is worth asking.
- Some people may find it helpful to have a script of the sermon, if that is possible.

- BSL interpreters may like to see a script of the sermon beforehand as it will help them to prepare in advance.
- Some churches may use a projector for the hymns and prayers and this can be helpful.

To contact the Chaplain to the deaf and hard of hearing community in the Salisbury Diocese, Rev Neil Robinson.

Text 07717 055219 Email deafpriest@icloud.com

See salisbury.anglican.org/workingforjustice/ministrytothedeaf-deafchaplaincy/
For more information

RNID, the national hearing loss charity can provide information. See rnid.org.uk Information line 0808 808 0123

Email contact@rnid.org.uk

Supporting people with visual impairment

'If only I could have a lift I could go to church.'

- There are several hundred diseases of the eye: it is important to understand the individuality of people suffering from this loss. Never assume what a person needs - ask them and respect their wishes.
- Blind and visually impaired people often experience communication difficulties as people take eye contact and body language for granted.
- When you greet a blind person, gently touch their arm and tell them your name, making sure they hear correctly. When you are leaving them, particularly from a small group situation, again gently touch their arm giving your name before going away. (Most sight loss is due to the ageing process and therefore some people may also have a degree of hearing loss, hence the request to make sure people have heard what is being said.)
- Please note braille is not used as much as previously. In a church situation tactile forms of reading, such as Braille and Moon, are very rarely used as it is bulky and difficult to manage. A particular individual may have need of this material, but in this case, it is likely they will have their own. If you have a blind/partially sighted person in your congregation, ask them first. If it is a visitor, it might be better to explain why you don't have these items

rather than invest in something which will only be used once or twice if at all - they will surely understand but appreciate your concern.

- Most people with sight loss will carry a white status cane. This obviously helps their sighted contemporaries to be aware of their situation. However, some people may be too sensitive about their loss to carry a cane.
- Techniques have been developed to help sighted people guide blind/partially sighted people safely, e.g. going through gaps only wide enough for one, helping them into chairs, sitting at a table and assisting them into vehicles. These techniques would be extremely useful to make someone feel safe and cared for. (See RNIB below)
- Taking time to describe the surroundings to a blind/partially sighted person can help them orientate themselves. If they are on their own, offering to sit with them might be appreciated: blindness can be very isolating.

The Torch Trust provides Christian resources and activities for blind and partially sighted people and advice for churches.

www.torchtrust.org Tel. 01858 438260 Email info@torchtrust.org

The Dorset Blind Association supports blind and partially sighted people to lead happy lives.

www.dorsetblind.org.uk Tel. 01202 712865

Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) provides information.

www.rnib.org.uk

Helpline 0303 123 9999 Email helpline@rnib.org.uk

For guiding techniques search under guiding a blind or partially sighted person. It takes you straight to their page with a Be Helpful Guide and a short video.

Supporting people with physical disabilities and those who use a wheelchair

'I don't want people to say they will pray for my healing as if they are rejecting who I am, my identity.'

'If I am sat in my wheel chair in the middle of the aisle I feel conspicuous and uncomfortable.'

- Access is a key issue. Ramps and wide doors are important.
- Accessible toilets are crucial for many in a congregation.
- It is important to ask people where they would like to sit during worship and during social events etc. People will have their own preferences. Some may like to be near the front, others may not! It is important that it is where they feel comfortable and as an integral part of the church community.
- It is especially important to speak directly to the person and not to the person who may be accompanying them.
- In services we often say sit or kneel or stand at various points. As part of the welcome at the beginning of a service it can be helpful to say 'please stay seated during the service if that is more comfortable' or to say 'please stand as you are able' or use similar phrases in the course of the service.
- Ask people if they would like communion taken to them if that seems appropriate.

Dorchester Disabled Club - for information about activities
contact Theresa Rogers Tel. 07826287658
theresarogersdorchesterdisabledclub@gmail.com

Email

Scope has useful information www.scope.org.uk Helpline 0808 800 3333
Email helpline@scope.org.uk

Supporting people who experience mental ill health

One in four of us will experience a mental health problem in any one year.
(Mental Health Foundation)

- It is important to listen to people and always to respect confidentiality.
- Churches can be a source of friendship.
- A faith gives all of us a framework for living.
- It is important to encourage people to access treatment and professional advice. We have heard of instances of churches encouraging people to reduce or even give up medication with seriously negative consequences.
- When giving support to someone with a mental health problem it is important to be aware that their illness can fluctuate, and you may be needed over a long period of time. It is important to be prepared for your support to be an ongoing commitment.
- Some churches place great emphasis on joy. This can be a challenge for someone who is feeling sad. It is helpful to remind ourselves that there are passages in the Bible expressing sadness and feelings of abandonment, for example, Job, Lamentations and some Psalms.
- If there are lay pastoral assistants in the congregation, they may have had / be able to have some training on mental health. They then may be able to offer advice to other members of the congregation on how to support people.

Dorset Health Care NHS Trust

For supports and services please see www.dorsethealthcare.nhs.uk/access-mental-health

For Connection the mental health helpline call 0800 652 0190

Mental Health Matters is a web resource on mental health for the Church of England. www.mentalhealthmatters-cofe.org

The Dorset Mental Health Forum is a local peer led charity. It exists to improve the lives of everyone affected by mental illness by promoting wellbeing and recovery. It has information on local services.

www.dorsetmentalhealthforum.org.uk Tel. 01305 257172

Mind Dorset provides support to anyone facing a mental health problem in the county. www.dorsetmind.uk Tel. 01202 55166

Mind is a national organisation providing advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

www.mind.org.uk Support line 0300 102 1234 Info line 0300123 3393

Supporting people with learning disabilities

'I love going to church.' 'I like seeing people.'

'I like singing to the Lord, hearing God's word.' 'I pray at home and worship. It is nice to do it with other people.' 'I have been made to feel welcome.'

People with learning disabilities do not always have the support to express their faith, especially if they have moved out of their family home and into a supported living setting.

- It is helpful to everyone if language is as straightforward as possible, with clear instructions about what is happening in the service.
- Ask people what is helpful to them. Sometimes a person may like to have a buddy in the church.
- Church websites need to give clear information.
- There may be members of the congregation who can present information in easyread. (see www.easy-read-online.co.uk for an example)
- Sometimes some separate teaching and worship may be useful but it is important that people do not feel segregated.
- Dorchester Baptist Church holds inclusive services twice a year. People with learning disabilities help with planning and participate in these events. They welcome people from other churches to come along and if they wish to be involved www.dorchesterbc.org.uk
- What about reaching out to people in supported living in the parish and inviting them to an event in your church as a way of breaking the ice?

People First Dorset is an organisation where people with learning disabilities support each other to speak up and lead change. They run a Friendship Club which organises regular social events. www.peoplefirstdorset.org.uk Tel. 01305 257600

Mencap provides general information www.mencap.org.uk
Helpline 0808 808 1111 Email helpline@mencap.org.uk

West Dorset Mencap, supporting people with learning disabilities is based in Bridport. It has a shop in Trinity Street, Dorchester
www.westdorsetmentap.org

'Going to Church' in the Books Beyond Words series is a useful introduction
www.booksbeyondwords.co.uk

Supporting people on the autistic spectrum

- Members of the congregation need to be aware that people on the autistic spectrum will have a range of needs and will probably interpret what they say literally.
- If someone comes to church regularly they may have a place where they prefer to sit.
- They need to be informed if there are changes to the normal pattern of worship or if there are likely to be sudden noises e.g. an infant baptism.
- Having 'safe' and 'quiet' spaces within churches is helpful. There needs to be an announcement at the beginning of services to let people know what is available.

Ann Memmott provides useful information for churches on **What is Autism**
www.churchesforall.org.uk

Duncan Honeybourne has information about living with Asperger's syndrome on his website. www.duncanhoneybourne.com/autism

Autism Unlimited provides information and advice. Autism-unlimited.org
Tel.01202 483360

The National Autistic Society provides information. www.autism.org.uk

Supporting family carers

'We don't want to be singled out and made special.'

Some disabled people live with their families and are supported by them.

- At its best the church provides support, help, care and acceptance for all the family, especially when other agencies are cutting back.
- Family carers may feel they are judged, taken over (which can be deskilling) or invisible. It is important that in our interactions we think about both people with disabilities and family carers.
- Both family carers and people with disabilities need to be able to tell their stories if and when they are ready. Members of the church community need to understand where boundaries lie and to respect them.
- Do family carers always have the opportunity to worship or join in church activities? Ask them what they need.

Dorchester Carers Group www.helpandkindness.co.uk. Tel.
01305 269073

Carers UK. www.carersuk.org Carers' advice line 0808 808
7777

The Carers Trust www.carers.org

What does Christianity have to say?

'It is the difference between law and love.' (Rt Rev David Thomson Oct 2014)

At the beginning of this booklet we explored how we need to go beyond meeting legal requirements and practicalities for disabled people and move towards creating real belonging through love. Professor John Swinton is a theologian who has explored what this might look like in more detail. He writes that the political concept of inclusion is insufficient to create real community in our churches². It is important to make sure we comply with the laws around disability, but we must not think the job is done once the ramp or loop system is installed. The idea of inclusion does not go far enough in overcoming the sense of isolation or even alienation, that may be felt by some disabled people. For John Swinton, the key to the kind of transformation needed does not lie in politics, but in Jesus. He argues that it is only as we learn to love each other as Jesus loves that we can create communities where true belonging is possible.

'God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them.'
(Genesis 1: 27)

'I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.' (Psalm 139: 14)

The way in which disabled people are spoken about, grouped together despite dramatic differences between them, and measured against an arbitrary 'normal' contributes to feelings of marginalisation. John Swinton observes 'the truth is that the only real norm for human beings, even at a genetic level, is difference.' We need to question ourselves about why we choose to treat some differences in a distinct way from all the other differences that there are between us.

Our Christian understanding is that however we are formed, we are all made in the image of God. We all, in a way we perhaps cannot fully understand, reflect God's glory and reveal God's own self to the world. This does not just apply to some people - those whom Western society in the early 21st century has decided are 'normal' or 'beautiful' - it applies to all people in all ages. It is an

²From Inclusion to Belonging: a practical theology of community, disability and humanness (Journal of Religion, Disability and Health, 16: 172-190, 2012)

inherent part of being human. This is potentially a powerful corrective to the way society views difference and disability. We might all be different, but it is in our humanness we bear the image of God.

John Swinton argues that if we love as Jesus loved – ‘love one another as I have loved you’ (John 13: 34-35) - we can create the kind of community where all truly belong. The hallmark of this kind of belonging is that we cannot imagine what life would be without each other, in all our difference. He says

‘To be included you just need to be present. To belong you need to be missed.’

We know we belong when others feel a sense of emptiness and loss when we are absent. When our gifts are missed and longed for, when the community feels radically different when we are missing – then we belong. John Swinton observes that each of us needs to be longed for ‘in the same way as the prodigal son’s father longed for the presence of his wayward son ... and in the same way that God longs for us to be present with God.’

This broadens the view dramatically. We move from working out how to ‘deal with’ issues raised by disability to renewing the whole of our communal life together for all people. Each of us needs to belong as much as the next person – disability or not. Perhaps it is only when we cease making these distinctions and learn to love each other as we are, made in God’s image, that true community can flourish.

John Swinton has pointed to the differences and uniqueness of each individual made in the image of God. In writing this booklet we have heard about the importance of meeting each person’s needs and have been made aware that we need to appreciate everyone’s gifts so that all can truly belong.

Key questions for churches

- Do you demonstrate that everyone belongs in words and action, ensuring people can contribute if they wish?
- Have you identified the skills and gifts of all members of the congregations?
- Do you ask members of your church what is helpful to them?
- Have you identified people in the congregation who have gifts to support people?
- Do you always have welcomers? (It is also important to ensure that everyone shares a welcoming role-it is not just up to one or two people)

Additional resources

Disability Rights Handbook 2024-2025

The Church of England website has a list of resources on www.churchsupporthub/allresources/barrierefreebelonging

See churchofengland.org for the Equal Access to Church Buildings and the Disability Project 2024-6

Welcoming and Including Autistic People in our Churches and Communities by Ann Mammott www.oxfordanglican.org

The Mental Health Foundation provides information. www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Through the Roof has arrange of resources including ***Removing Barriers: A disability audit to enable churches to welcome and include disabled people***

Through the Roof has a Roofbreakers network for people with a specific interest in including disabled people in church life. www.throughtheroof.org

Making Church Accessible to All: Including disabled people in church life
Tony Phelps-Jones.

Enabling Church: A Bible based resource towards the inclusion of disabled people Gordon Temple and Lin Ball

Disability: The inclusive church resource John M. Hull and Bob Callaghan

The Joy of Knowing Pete Hazel Morgan writes about the experiences of a young man who had Down's syndrome and was non-verbal including his membership of the church www.youcaxton.co.uk/pete

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