

*Disabled clergy in the Church of England*

*Results Summary of the Survey of Disabled Clergy – 2006*

**Introduction**

In July 2005 an audit of clergy was carried out by the Research and Statistics Department, Archbishops' Council to establish diversity monitoring across the Church. This was an outcome of the General Synod debate in 2003 on 'Called to act justly'. At the request of the Archbishops' Council, Ministry Division, the 2005 audit included a section on disability. This section posed two questions i.e. 'Do you have a disability?' and 'Would you be willing to be contacted by the Archbishops Council Adviser of deafness and disability issues?' The responses to these questions were analysed and the results set out in the paper, 'Church of England clergy with disabilities audit 2005' issued by the Archbishops' Council, Research and Statistics Department in July 2006. The main finding of this aspect of the audit exercise was that 3.4% of clergy across parishes and chaplaincies etc of the Church of England reported disabilities. A copy of this report can be found on the CMDDP page of the Church of England web site at

<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/lifeevents/ministry/workofmindiv>.

As a result of this the Ministry Division, Committee for Ministry of and among Deaf and disabled people (CMDDP), undertook to do further work to enquire about the situations facing disabled clergy.

Of those who responded, "Yes" to the second question in the original survey 100 were selected from a total of 274 and a further survey conducted in 2006. This asked questions about their personal circumstances and their relationship with the Church before and after ordination. 62 completed questionnaires were received and the data in those responses forms the basis of this report to General Synod. A copy of the fuller report from which this report to Synod was compiled can be found on the Ministry Division section, CMDDP page of the Church of England web site as above.

**The Respondents**

The average age of the respondents is 41 and ranges between 30 and 85 years of age.<sup>1</sup> 45% of the sample was disabled before ordination; the rest became disabled either during training or after ordination. The spread of the type of disability of the sample is shown is as follows:

Depression	Fatigue	Hearing	Learning Disability	Physical	Sight	Walking and Mobility
1.61%	11.29%	19.35%	6.45%	11.29%	6.45%	43.55%

**Selection Process**

87.5%<sup>2</sup> of the respondents ordained after 1999<sup>3</sup> were disabled before ordination, as opposed to the 30.4% of those ordained before this date.

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<sup>1</sup> Gender was not considered in this survey.

<sup>2</sup> This is derived from the 14, out of the 16 respondents who were ordained after 1999, who indicated that they were disabled before ordination.

<sup>3</sup> Given that the Disability Discrimination Act was published in 1995, and the average length of the ordination process (from selection to the completion of training) is four years, it follows that those ordained in 1999 probably attended panel around the time the Disability Act was passed.

While it is true that there a fewer respondents ordained after 1999 than there were before this year, overall, the figures point to *a detectable improvement in the ease with which people with disabilities can enter ordained ministry.*

This is perfectly exemplified by a respondent who recounted their personal experience with the selection process transcribed below:

*“When I began enquiring about ordination in the late 1980s I was asked if I could guarantee the church getting its ‘moneysworth’ from me as it would cost a lot of money to train me for ordination ... Later ... I found a very different approach – one of acceptance, encouragement and enabling.”* (This respondent was ordained in 2004)

### Respondents’ Experience after Ordination

While this survey was not conducted with the intention of creating a bleak picture of the quality of life of disabled clergy, a mention must be made to the high level of discontent amongst this group. Consequently, it must be noted that respondents reported a high percentage of negative experiences with their dioceses<sup>4</sup>. The table below simplifies the distribution of these experiences.

Experience of Dioceses for Ministers Ordained Before 1999					
Before Ordination			After Ordination		
Aggregate - Positive	4	28.60%	Aggregate - Positive	8	17.40%
Aggregate - Negative	2	14.30%	Aggregate - Negative	21	45.60%
Experience of Dioceses for Ministers Ordained After 1999					
Before Ordination			After Ordination		
Aggregate - Positive	2	14.30%	Aggregate - Positive	6	37.50%
Aggregate - Negative	3	21.40%	Aggregate - Negative	4	25%

The increase in the aggregate percentage of positive experiences after ordination (for clergy ordained after 1999) is very encouraging and can be interpreted as *a sign, though weak, that the quality of life for disabled clergy is slowly improving.* However, for clergy ordained before 1999, and therefore generally older, this does not yet appear to be the case. Moreover, 25% is still a high percentage of dissatisfaction. The main complaint seems to be that that the dioceses are not succeeding in understanding and supporting clergy with disabilities<sup>5</sup>.

### What can dioceses and churches do?

14.5% of the sample would like small **architectural adjustments**. Some examples are: reducing gravel in churchyards since wheelchairs are not easily pushed over them and introducing ramps that is not too steep. This applies also in the selection of venues for meetings/conferences.

33.8% of the sample indicated that they need more **pastoral care**. Some examples include trying to make reasonable adjustments to both home and working life; including amongst those taking early retirement that wish to remain a part of the Church.

*“Since retirement I have become a non-person ... No-one asked me if I might feel able to assist [in any way]. I rather think it is a waste of a lot of training”*

<sup>4</sup> The term 'dioceses' is used very broadly to indicate the institutions responsible for “employing” clergy and consequently their care and support.

<sup>5</sup> This was claimed by 72.6% of the sample. In particular, amongst other complaints, 17.7% felt that they did not have support or understanding, 16.1% felt abandoned and underused.

Consequently, though they may not say so, many would greatly appreciate some degree of involvement from parish/deanery/diocese to enable them to continue in the work of their vocation.

9.7% of the sample mentioned **access to information** as a major problem. This ranged from PA systems that are unsuitable for people with hearing aids, to the lack of provision of bibles and song sheets with larger print. Difficulties with OHPs and power-point presentations were also mentioned. Some also mentioned the desire for finding alternative ways for providing information that are more accessible to those with learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

A respondent provides an example of ways in which small adjustments can mean so much to disabled clergy with mobility problems who stated:

*“At my ordination to the priesthood, we all stood for the prayers instead of kneeling. The bishop said we should do this, as I cannot kneel. There was a real sense of ‘no-one should be different’ even though it was traditional to kneel. If only all bishops thought like this! (Perhaps they do!).”*

This small gesture changed the experience of the day of ordination from one of discomfort and isolation, to one of great joy and belonging.

### **Conclusion**

While it is true that employing a disabled person inevitably means making some adjustments, not solely architectural, to the working environment, as this paper has shown, this can be achieved with relatively minor changes to the *modus operandi*, or *modus vivendi*, of the Diocese.

This is important not only in order to comply with government legislation, but on a more human level. A Church that recognises the needs of disabled people in their practices, is one that actively wishes to reach out to the whole of God’s creation. Disabled clergy feel they have much to give to both disabled and non-disabled congregations. For instance, a respondent who suffers with depression stated:

*“I was ill and had a long period off work during my curacy. The incumbent was fabulous, as was the congregation. On my return I was open about what it is like to have severe depression and this liberated others to talk about their experiences as sufferers of carers – it’s an important part of my ministry now”*

Another, suffering with a severe hearing impairment wrote:

*“[My disability] has been of value in supporting elderly members who are losing their hearing. It has also been the basis of developing a theology of disability”*

**Disabled clergy bring significant insights and gifts to ministry because they have impairment not in spite of that. These gifts can be complementary to other colleagues in ministerial teams. Disabled clergy can be called to different kinds of ministry in the Church and they should be affirmed, valued and enabled to exercise these various ministries. Disabled clergy would want to be accountable in the same way as non-disabled clergy not patronised or worse still ignored. The Church needs to develop strategies for pastoral care to ensure the affirmation, valuing and enabling of disabled clergy.**

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Ministry Division  
Committee for Ministry of and among Deaf and Disabled People