

## THE PILGRIMAGE MODEL

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### **“The physical affects the spiritual”**

*(Fr David - St George's Preston)*

We cannot hope to have a positive effect on someone's spiritual wellbeing, or on their spiritual journey, if they cannot access our building or our facilities or our activities etc.

### **“Our buildings should reflect the glory of God”**

*(Dean Peter - Blackburn Cathedral)*

We cannot hope adequately to reflect the glory of God unless we try to reflect it **for**, and **to**, and **with**, everyone.

**“We cannot say ‘All Welcome’ and leave some people to find that they can't access our building or our activities. We shouldn't use the language of being inclusive, welcoming and accessible if that ignores the limitations of that inclusion, accessibility, or welcome. To do otherwise leaves us open to challenges of dishonesty and hypocrisy.”**

**Biblical warnings against stumbling blocks:**

□ **Leviticus 19.14** -

*"You shall not revile the deaf  
or put a stumbling block before the blind;  
you shall fear your God: I am the Lord"*

□ **Matthew 18.16** -

*Jesus said:  
"If any of you put a stumbling block  
before one of these little ones who believe in me,  
it would be better for you  
if a great millstone were fastened around your neck  
and you were drowned in the depth of the sea".*

- The verse in Leviticus comes in the middle of a chapter setting out a moral code, and makes clear that in God's eyes, reviling people with disabilities or putting stumbling-blocks in their way, is on a par with stealing, fraud, selling your daughter into prostitution, and a number of other

things which God prohibits.

In other words, God isn't very happy when we do it!

The way the world has engaged with people with disabilities hitherto, has been based heavily on two approaches:

- the **medical** model of disability (in which the person and their disabilities are seen as the problem),
- and the **social** model of disability (in which the barriers to access, which society puts in the way of the disabled person, are seen as the problem).

The Church has often tried to go somewhere in the middle (as we so often do).

We don't simply say '***tough, it's you that needs to be fixed if you want to access what we have to offer***' as the strict medical model suggests;

Neither do we say "***OK, it's our facilities and how we do things that cause you these problems; we need to make lots of changes, so that we're not stopping you accessing what we have to offer***", as the social model would have us do.

Instead, and because we're **nice** (well we are Anglicans...), we've fallen into what we might call the "charity" model: we fall into saying "**oh you poor thing, let me help you!**"

People are categorised into those who can minister, and those who are ministered to. People with disabilities are often 'automatically' placed in the latter category, as people who must be ministered-to. Admittedly, this is a generalisation, but in many instances describes reality.

There are many motivations behind this model - elements of guilt-assuagement, of people meeting their own need to be 'serving', of building a Christian CV, etc. But the "doer vs done-to" model is not acceptable. It's a one-way model, categorising people as either independent or dependent. An independent *agent* acts upon a dependent *object*. Independence becomes the ideal or the goal - and an individual displaying a significant level of dependence becomes a problem to be fixed or removed.

I recall an occasion when I was meeting with a group of priests, one of whom is a wheelchair user. The meeting had been arranged in a first-floor restaurant with no wheelchair access. My brother was rather unceremoniously

lifted up in his chair by four others, and manhandled up the stairs in a very undignified way, much to his embarrassment. He had been put in a position where he had little choice but to be reduced to being the object of others' ministry. This episode sticks in my mind as an illustration that while the intentions may stem from the best motives, nevertheless the outworking, the action can be very wrong and disabling.

Of course, all these models contain some truth - there **are** aspects of a disabling condition which require medical intervention to alleviate their effects, and there **are** plenty of barriers to access in society which require to be dealt with.

There **are** occasions when people with disabilities need to receive ministry, and there are ways in which they might be dependent on wider society.

But in **focusing** on these aspects and making them **universal**, none of the models go far enough in engaging with *either* the central aspects of personhood and relationship which are at the heart of a Christian understanding of our identity in God, *or* with the call to human flourishing which flows from them.

And they all involve **othering**....

...Disabled people are "THEY" - a different group from "US".

But that's not how it's supposed to be.

We are **the** Body of Christ, **the** People of God, **the** Church – one body with many members, all part of the same "US".

Where the world preaches independence, the Biblical, kingdom aspiration is for **inter**dependence - a way of relating, of being, in which all minister and are ministered to, all serve and are served, all flourish through enabling all to flourish. For Christians, the focus needs to be on **mutuality**.

As the Body of Christ, **Inter**dependent, we need to be always.

- learning from each other
- Travelling together
- Open to one another
- User-led

The voice, the experience, the wisdom of disabled people (of all sorts) needs to be at the centre of our approach.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “DISABLED PEOPLE”?

### All made in God’s image

#### □ **Genesis 1.27**

*“God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them”.*

#### □ **Psalm 139 13-14a:**

*“For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”*

#### □ ***There are no factory seconds in God’s creation!***

God saw **all** that he had made and saw that it was very good (Gen 1.31).

God does not look at any one of us and say

***“whoops, I messed up that time!”***

Ability / Disability is NOT BINARY

(though the world often wants to reduce everything to binaries, and make subjective dividing lines into absolutes and gulfs).

If we reduce our thinking to two pigeonholes, abled and disabled, into which we put people – then I'm afraid the abled one is empty.

Woundedness and disability taken into the life of God by the risen Christ. See John 20. 24-29.

Why is woundedness and disability taken into risen life?

Because it's the ***common human experience***.

The universal human experience. Part of who we **ALL** are.

We need to take seriously that we are **ALL** wounded / disabled in some ways. Beyond that, it's simply a matter of scale.

We're all on a spectrum of ability/disability for all sorts of conditions.



- The line between ability/disability is subjective (like height - where does “tall” begin? To me, at 6’7”, people whom you call tall, seem short!)
  
- Our own position on each spectrum will shift over time
  
- We’re all able in **some** spectra, disabled in **others** - *think about Stephen Hawking: on one spectrum, he was very disabled. On another, arguably the greatest mind in physics.*

We recognise that we’re all experts in some things and not in others, we all have our own experiences but not those of others.

When it comes to understanding disability, the people who know best are disabled people!

- each knows best re the conditions they live with.
- We all need to listen to each other to learn the best way to respond to needs etc
- Experts by experience are the most expert  
*(you may know a lot about Accrington - you may even be*

*called Stanley - but unless you live in Accrington, you can't properly understand life in Accrington!)*

The practice and process of listening to, and learning from, each other is crucial, because the church is a **community**.

- St Benedict - all must have their voice, all must be heard. The Abbot must listen to everyone, even the youngest.
- Church is a common participation in the love of God as the Body of Christ, wounded as we are. Everyone's voice matters.
- All people must be allowed to have AGENCY. Sometimes, with the best of intentions, we deny people their agency, their adulthood. *Eg we make those who need an accessible toilet, ask for the key. Or we devise wonderful technological solutions like the "magic steps" that slide away to reveal a platform lift, but then put the controls inside the building with no way to 'summon' the lift.*

The concept of belonging, of being with one another, of honouring, valuing, and respecting each other, is key to the achievement of ***inclusion*** (as opposed to accommodation or toleration).

Therefore we need to be a people who practice *radical* community, *radical* inclusion, *radical* hospitality, *radical* welcome, etc – these are Gospel imperatives. Jesus did this, and so must we.

This is fundamental to human flourishing – we cannot flourish independently, only communally, only interdependently. I cannot flourish properly unless you do.

Because of all this, we must go further than the Medical, or Social, or Charitable understanding of how we approach the issue of accessibility for all.

The Church is a community of disciples on **pilgrimage** – and among the requirements for the pilgrimage group to enjoy a fruitful journey, are communality, interdependence, and mutual flourishing.

The Church's traditional "charity" model takes the worst of the medical and social models, and makes those with additional needs into objects of other people's ministry, where barriers are only overcome through the selfless help of others.

Rather than a model in which some people offer provision for others, we have therefore come to identify a model in which all attend to, and work with, each other in a user-led approach to inclusion - a "Jesus" model, a 'relational' model - a **pilgrimage** model in which we **start** with the understanding that we all travel together, learning continually about ourselves, one another, and the God in whom we find the fulfilment of our vocation as his people. It is a model which acknowledges that for us to flourish, we must flourish together.

On a pilgrimage, the journey is in many ways more important than the destination. It is in travelling together, sharing together, learning together, that those on pilgrimage find they are being blessed by one another and by God. Those who have 'led' pilgrimages usually agree that they learn as much from their fellow pilgrims as they themselves teach the group. A

pilgrimage is an embodiment of interdependence in that sense. As this applies irrespective of where on the spectra of disabilities individuals on pilgrimage find themselves - whether mental, physical, emotional, etc. - the motif of pilgrimage lends itself well to the model we are proposing.

What this means is that we need more of a focus on the process, the journey towards accessibility, than simply on the end result itself.

There's more to be gained by working together, involving those 'experts by experience' whom we can find to journey with us, and discovering where that takes us. In the process of working out and working through what's possible, we will learn more about each other and ourselves, more about what we can do together, and more about possibilities that we'd never have thought of ourselves.

Cp the 'man born blind':

*As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.*

*His disciples asked him,*

*'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'*  
Jesus answered,  
*'Neither this man nor his parents sinned;  
he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.  
We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day;  
night is coming when no one can work.*

***As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.'***

*John 9.1-5*

The man was blind - and yet through Jesus, the light of the world, he was able to see far more than the closed minds of the Pharisees. He was able to have VISION, and a completely different perspective on how things ought to be.

Paul's motif of the Body - we need each other to flourish.

This concept is at the root of the African concept of **UBUNTU** –  
*I am because we are; I flourish because we flourish.*

*Attitude* counts for so much.

In journeying together, we can develop a shared story which leads us to a set of **shared** aspirations, a desire to see all

**enabled** to access and be included, and a plan for how we might see these desires and aspirations realised.

Imagine a way of looking at what we do so as to achieve (as best we can), an **equality of experience** for all those who use our buildings.

Imagine developing together a way forward that isn't simply about how accessibility has to trump heritage at every turn, but is about how **accessibility and heritage can fit together** and work together to the benefit of both (*disabled people appreciate heritage too!*)

Imagine a solution that arises through everyone being heard, everyone's needs and aspirations being considered, and everyone being valued on the journey.

That might mean developing a plan that stretches out into the future 5, or 10 or more years. It might be (and should be) a plan which begins with us expanding our horizons and our understanding of what it means to travel together, and sharing

the wisdom and skills and experience that each of us brings to the party.

As we do that, we will probably find some quick wins that we can achieve with everyone's support, and some deeper issues that will need some travelling through together.

But that's the key - to *travel together*. Not to each turn up with the knowledge and skills that we have in our toolbox and be the expert who's come to fix the problem, but rather to seek a community of discovery as we approach a journey we will make together, a pilgrimage to wherever God leads us.

We might end up with something that looks similar to what we ourselves had first thought of, but we might not.

What's certain is that **we** won't be the same as we were in the beginning, because the ***pilgrimage*** will have helped us to grow:

- as people,
- as disciples,
- and as the Church.



*Thank you.*