

Affirming and Including Disabled People in the Whole Life of the Church

Summary

This motion asks Synod to focus attention on the “Cinderella” of minorities. Disabled people (including the demographic in our churches of frail, elderly people) are by far the largest marginalised group of people across the full breadth of the CofE. Recognising that (largely unfunded) good work is underway in many parts of the church, this motion sets out some of the urgent practical steps needed in the context of our calling as the Church *for all* in England. We profess a belief in the Body of Christ, whilst continuing to impede “weaker, indispensable members”, whom we are called to “honour”, from living out their calling among us (1 Corinthians 12: 12-31). The motion is the fruit of various working groups drawn from the CMDDP, the Disability Task Group & Diocesan Disability Advisers network. It is not intended to be exhaustive. It is an invitation to Synod to begin to champion and resource this work with the prominence it merits within the “radical welcome” of the diversity of people we are called to love and serve. The group which has developed this motion continues its work and hopes to offer further proposals, backed by a clear theory of change, at future Groups of Sessions.

Introduction

‘In God we have a new dignity and God calls us to fullness of life’
(*from the introduction to the CW Baptism service*)

1. The Church of England has a lot to do before it fully lives out its baptismal promise to all God’s people. If the Church is serious about us all having a new dignity and the fullness of life for all God’s people, then disabled people must be freed to participate fully in ministry and mission and therefore feel fully included. Action on disability is not just about meeting the needs of a minority (although that matters) but about acknowledging and celebrating our common humanity and ensuring that our life together does not perpetuate a misleading account of being made in the image and likeness of God.

A Note on Language

A particularly contested area here concerns language. There is no universal agreement on this within the disability movement, perhaps because historically the language has been largely shaped by professionals rather than by disabled people themselves. In the UK a majority of disabled people prefer identity-first language, that is, ‘**disabled person**’, whereas in the US the preference is still for person-first language, that is, ‘person with a disability’.

For this paper and debate, we are using identity-first language. Disabled person/people is preferred by the majority of disabled people in the UK because it reflects the social model of disability. This holds that people with, for example, chronic illness, physical impairment, or neurodiversity are disabled by barriers which discriminate against them. Society is set up for one type of body and mind, yet we are created in an infinite variety. I may have a physical

impairment, but it is society's physical, cultural, or attitudinal barriers which disable me, denying me the same access or opportunity as others.

For example, if someone with mobility issues is invited to a meeting but the only access is via stairs, that person has been disabled. They become disabled by the immediate physical barrier but also because of the decision on location. But if the meeting is held on the ground floor, they are not disabled for they can access the meeting as well as everyone else. They have a physical impairment but can take part on an equal basis.

A more detailed explanation of the Social model can be found on the Inclusion London website: <https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/disability-in-london/social-model/the-social-model-of-disability-and-the-cultural-model-of-deafness/>

Some nonetheless prefer 'person first' language, because it affirms the person ahead of their physical or mental health, diversity, or impairment. The challenge here is that a person's physical or mental state becomes an individual issue, the person deviating from a perception of normality, and disability may be conflated with inability. The person may be regarded as 'less than' rather than an equal part of God's diverse creation

For these reasons we adopt a social model of disability, and the language of 'disabled people'.

The Synod Motion

2. The motion before Synod does not pretend to be a comprehensive strategy. It is the first fruit of an ongoing conversation: we seek to begin with simple and achievable moves to bring about real, embedded, not just symbolic, change. Small, humble steps may change culture faster than sweeping declarations which may add burdens, stifle momentum or cannot be resourced. Our work will continue, and we will return to Synod with further, perhaps bolder, measures when we are confident that they will be effective

What this motion does – and does not – seek to achieve

3. It is unrealistic to believe that culture change within a complex institution like the church can be achieved in one giant step. Without a clear understanding of how change happens, disappointment and frustration are likely to follow. Our primary purpose is to start a ball rolling. Further proposals will be brought to the Business Committee when we know more about how targeted changes can shift wider culture. This approach is not because we lack vision – far from it! – but because articulating a vision is not enough.

4. So, we ask that Synod members do not treat this initial motion as a Christmas tree on which to hang every hoped-for development. We will of course consider any amendment on its merits, but we will resist amendments that are not accompanied by a convincing account of how they will bring about measurable change. We look forward to hearing and responding to all the ideas and comments that emerge and hope that this debate will indeed be a springboard towards a greater engagement by the church.

A Theory of Change

5. This motion comes from a group of members of the Disability Task Group, a subset of the Committee for Ministry among Deaf and Disabled People chaired by the Bishop of Bedford. Following the retirement of the former National Disability Advisor, Dr Roy McCloughry, we recognised that simply reappointing to a part time post (even if resources had been available) would risk ticking a box called “disability issues” without addressing the limited power of a national advisor to drive change across a diffuse institution like the Church of England, which often resists top-down directives.

6. Although we began by lamenting the lack of resources, we found that the first and most imaginative measures we came up with were not expensive. This convinced us that we should start by analysing how every proposal would, in practice, make things different, rather than by assuming that change followed inevitably from the allocation of money. To be sure, as ideas and proposals develop, resources will be needed. But we believe that budgets should follow from a theory of change and not become the theory itself.

7. So, for every proposal, we asked: what sort of change will this measure promote? Is it aiming to change things for a specific constituency or to affect everyone? Will these proposals have an impact, given what we know about how the church works? Are they likely to be cost-effective? Are we seeking quick wins or the long haul – or both?

8. We have kept in mind how many could be affected by this work. As recently as October-December 2020 government data revealed that 8.4 million people of working age (16-64) reported that they were disabled, which is 20% of the working age population¹. And the pandemic has left more than 2 million people in the UK with Long Covid.

The Motion

9. Why are we bringing these specific proposals to Synod at this time?

10. It is important to show that fresh thinking is already happening – and disabled people are leading the way. We celebrate the work already happening locally. For over 10 years an annual conference on disability and theology, run by disabled people for disabled people and hosted by St Martin in the Fields, has been resourcing disabled people to participate in the mission and ministry of the church. There is a growing number of disabled-led online communities engaging positively with the church, for example, *You Belong, Disability & Jesus*, the work of *WAVE* at St James' Muswell Hill, and the *Disability Advisory Group* at St Martin in the Fields, resonating far beyond their

1 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7540/CBP-7540.pdf>

buildings. This ground-breaking work is primarily done by unpaid disabled lay people. There is a sense of the Holy Spirit at work, calling for justice; modelling inclusion.

11. Each clause of the motion has been framed to reflect steps which we have gone into in depth and offer to Synod as likely to be effective, worthwhile, and achievable. To reiterate, this motion is the beginning of a process, not its culmination.

Rubrics

12. We start with something simple that we believe will make a clear statement of inclusion for disabled people. Many worship leaders habitually add appropriate words to indicate that particular postures are not compulsory, recognising that not can conform. But whilst the rubrics remain in place, an impression is given that those who cannot follow them are not participating fully. That is not an impression that the church actively intends to give. There is no suggestion here of imposing new liturgical stances on anyone – rather, we invite parishes and congregations to decide how to approach these questions inclusively, hoping that this will lead to thoughtful consideration of how everyone is enabled to participate. We have discussed this proposal with the staff of the Liturgical Commission, and they foresee no difficulty if Synod accepts this clause.

Data

13. It is a sad fact today that if you are not counted, you are often not acknowledged or missed. Moreover, it is important to be able to measure change if resources are to be deployed effectively – a matter of accountability and stewardship – and a base line must be established first. At present, we know little about the number who self-identify as disabled within the church, and this clause is a first step toward establishing a base line from which change toward greater inclusion and participation can be evaluated.

14. No data set is ever going to be fully comprehensive. No one is obliged to answer questions about disability, and a relatively high proportion who “prefer not to say” may be expected at first. As the major reason for people not wishing to disclose is that they believe that it will lead to discrimination, we will know that the church is safer and more welcoming for disabled people when more people are comfortable in self disclosing.

15. We propose to start by gathering data on clergy. Of course, disabled lay people matter just as much, but (a) the constituency is less well defined, making the collection of reliable data more challenging and (b) encouraging clergy to overcome reluctance to share information means their leadership will encourage lay people to respond. We anticipate that regularly seeking data about disabled people in ministry will gradually make the data set more authoritative as responding becomes more acceptable. This will take time, which makes starting as soon as possible even more pressing.

16. It is clear that some new resource will be necessary if this clause is to be acted upon. If Synod passes this motion, we shall incorporate this work, properly costed, in a bid for some of the Triennium Funding already earmarked for work on inclusion and diversity.

Diocesan Advisory Committees

17. It is too simple to say that heritage issues trump accessibility for the CofE's many thousands of buildings. Many examples show what can be done to improve accessibility and participation, even in the most historically significant buildings. But the experience, expertise and imagination to make such changes happen is not always available. We want to ensure that disabled people's voices are heard in the places where plans and decisions are made. This clause is intended to generate that shift of thinking.

18. We do not believe that this decision can be left to each DAC. They face many demands, and the perspective of disabled people could easily drift down the agenda. So, we propose that legislation is brought before Synod to amend the Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction and Care of Churches Measure 2018 so that every DAC includes at least one suitably experienced disabled person. Questions of accessibility would not then be decided without reference to those affected. Disabled people's concerns should cease to be a "category", discussed only when others have noticed the need, and that questions of access and participation become, potentially, part of every discussion. This clause has been discussed with the Legal Office who see no legal objections to taking it forward.

Diocesan Disability Advisers

19. A significant part of the former National Disability Advisor's work was individual casework where greater local knowledge would have enabled more effective responses. Yet, the volume of case work exceeded the time a lone national advisor had to offer. We believe that strengthening the network of Diocesan Disability Advisers is likely to be more effective in achieving grass roots change than reappointing a national advisor.

20. We know how difficult it was for the church to respond positively to the recommendation in *From Lament to Action* that every diocese should have a racial justice adviser, and we want to avoid similar problems. We recognise that Synod cannot dictate budget priorities for individual dioceses and that resources are tight at every level. Therefore, this clause does not make immediate demands on every diocesan budget or ask that dioceses respond in identical ways. Instead, we commend a collective approach to dioceses and hope that it will help make difficult budget choices easier to address.

21. Some dioceses already have Disability Advisers doing a fantastic job. But appointments are patchy across the country, resulting in areas where advice for parishes, or for disabled people, is effectively non-existent. Whilst many Disability Advisers are volunteers, there is a strong case that they have more traction if the post is remunerated, bringing greater accountability, and freeing the adviser to contribute to strategic thinking rather than having to fit the role around a primary post.

22. So, in the spirit of *Transforming Effectiveness*, we encourage dioceses to consider together how provision for Disability Advice can be offered across a cluster of dioceses or possibly a region. It might well start with discussion in bishops' regional

meetings or between Diocesan Secretaries. It is a proposal to think outside the conventional box.

23. We intend to monitor developments on this front; where there are imaginative responses in one area, we will promote them to others and, if necessary, we shall think again and consider different proposals if this approach fails to initiate action.

Thinking Theologically

24. Much good work has been done on the concept of disability in Christian theology.² Our work leading up to this debate has been framed within a clear theological context.

25. If we manufacture a supposed “norm”, defining full humanity in terms of autonomy and a certain set of abilities and capacities, and treat everyone who differs from this norm as somehow deficient, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Autonomy is one aspect of life for most of us, but it is overshadowed by the shared reality of dependency. The window of so-called independence is very small, for in infancy we are entirely dependent upon others and, for most of us, dependency returns with advancing years.

26. The culmination of our salvation is realised in the figure of a human being, profoundly disabled by the actions of others, hung on a cross, unable to move, barely able to speak, denied of both physical and mental agency. That image is central to our understanding of the Incarnate God. The Incarnation is not static but a narrative from conception to ascension, with the marks of the risen body sharing in the whole narrative of life and death. So, this debate and motion are about an approach to being the Body of Christ which reveals the nature we all share and helps all to witness to the incarnate, constrained, liberated, and disabled, God-in-Christ in the world. The Covid 19 pandemic has drawn attention to our dependence on one another, something that disabled people have embodied and have thus shared with the wider church in its time of crisis.

27. It follows that a world developed and maintained for the benefit of majorities falls short of capturing a full and theological anthropology. Dan Goodley, Professor of Disability Studies at Sheffield University, in his recent book *Disability and Other Human Questions*,³ considers that dependency is a vital component of being human.³ Dependency is not a characteristic of “other people”, it is a truth about us all – but we have problematised certain kinds of dependency and overlooked or denied others.

² For example, the works of John M. Hull, Nancy Eiesland, John Swinton, Amos Yong, Steve Mee, Frances Young and Sharon V. Betcher.

³ Goodley, Dan. 2021. *Disability and Other Human Questions*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.

28. We seek to start simply and humbly, and to grow in boldness for sustainable change.

*Revd Canon Timothy Goode
For the Committee for the Ministry of and among Deaf and Disabled People. July 2022*