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Learning Disabilities

A discussion starter



The Church of Scotland

CREATING COMMUNITIES OF BELONGING

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In this short article I want to offer a way of looking at being with people who have disabilities which is respectful, faithful and true to the Gospel that we seek to proclaim. The apostle Paul tells us that we are all part of the one Body of Christ. We are so deeply intertwined that what happens to one part of the body affects all of the body (1 Corinthians 12). More than that, those parts of the body that the world considers to be weak and undesirable are in fact vital for the whole of the body. One of the tragedies of our society (and, sadly, often our Churches) is the fact that many assume that people with disabilities are weak or “undesirable”. Paul indicates strongly that there is no place for such attitudes in God’s Church. It is our responsibility to ensure that the Body of Christ is not broken by exclusion. In what follows I will suggest that if we cannot effectively include people with disabilities, we will have a hard time claiming that we are really the Church. Paul’s vision in Galatians 3.28 of a community within which there is “No longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female”, can easily be extended to breaking down the barriers between black and white and able-bodied or disabled. Within the community of the Church, differences can never be barriers. God has no favourites (Romans 2.11).

Included but not belonging

Let me begin with a story. A few years ago I spent some time with Elaine, a middle-aged woman with a disability. She told me how hard it was for her to find friendships. She was very lonely sometimes. Elaine loved going to chapel and attended regularly. She participated in the worship and loved having tea with her friends after the service. But then I asked her how often she saw her church friends during the week? “Never,” she replied. Within the boundaries of the religious service of worship she seemed to have found acceptance and a certain level of friendship. However, that acceptance and friendship stopped at the door of the chapel. She effectively had a friendship that lasted for an hour and a half on a Sunday morning. Elaine was included within the fellowship of the church, but she did not belong.



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In the room but not of the room

Kieran’s story is similar. Kieran is a young man who has a significant learning disability. He is confined to a wheelchair and has limited speech. But he loves to go to church. Well he used to. Kieran lives in a care home. His carers had decided that it might be a good thing to take Kieran to church. They knew that he loved to sing and to listen to music and he had been quite involved with a church when he was younger. So they took him to the local church. During the three months he attended, not one person spoke to him. One person patted him on the head in passing but that was it! The staff wondered if people were scared of Kieran, or embarrassed, or uncertain how to approach him. Either way, the experience was not a good one and they decided there was little point in Kieran continuing to attend. One member of staff said: “Kieran gets a more positive response in the local coffee shop”. Kieran has not been involved in any faith community since. He was in the church but not of the church; he was included, but he did not belong.

Beyond inclusion to belonging

The problem with a focus on including people with disabilities in our church communities is that, to include someone, they simply have to be in the room. All you need is access: ramps, large-print hymn books, hearing loops etc. As long as people with disabilities are in the room they are, at least in principle, included. Politics, disability legislation and human rights may well be necessary for people with disabilities to gain access to our communities, but they can never be enough. The Church is required to move beyond mere inclusion to belonging.

As Jean Vanier and I have said, Jesus' friendships urge us to move beyond inclusion towards belonging. To belong, you need to be missed: people need to miss you and to long for you when you are not there. To belong we need to feel that we matter. Belonging is the place where we truly meet. The Body of Christ is only truly the Body of Christ when all peoples have a place where they belong. The heart of the Gospel is all about belonging and this destroys fear and loneliness. It compels us to renew our minds and change our hearts.¹

The task of Church leaders is to create the circumstances where communities of belonging become a genuine possibility. If people with disabilities are not amongst "us" or feel that they cannot be with the Church, then the Church really cannot be "the Church".

Guiding people towards the formation of this kind of community does not mean creating new programmes or developing specialist disability ministries. Such things might be useful, but unless our hearts are changed nothing will change. All of us (able bodied and disabled), need to have our minds renewed (Romans 12.2) in order that we learn what it means to live together as one Body in Jesus. The task for leadership is twofold. Firstly, to help people to notice the subtle (and not so subtle!) ways in which people with disabilities are prevented from finding places of belonging within our Churches. This simply means noticing experiences such as Elaine's and Kieran's and mobilising others to notice and to act differently. Of course we can't force people to be friends with others, but we can create a situation where offering friendship is the norm.

Secondly, leaders need to encourage people to offer and to receive hospitality. Often when it comes to being with people living with disabilities the tendency is to want to be hospitable towards them. That is fair enough. However, hospitality is a two-way street. When you look at the life of Jesus it is clear that he was sometimes a guest and sometimes the host. The constant movement from guest to host is a mark of divine hospitality. What might it look like to us if we perceived ourselves as guests before people with advanced dementia? What if we thought of ourselves as guests in the lives of people with mobility impairments or people with learning disabilities – guests who are there to learn and not to teach, guests who are open to the gifts that emerge from being with people whose lives are lived differently. When we learn to live in such ways we become hospitable people who long to create hospitable spaces where people truly belong.

Friendship, belonging, noticing, guesting and hosting: these are not complicated gifts to offer to one another. But in their simplicity we will encounter Jesus and, as we encounter Jesus, we can truly become a Church within which there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, male nor female, able-bodied nor disabled, only people who belong together in Jesus. ■

DISCUSS

1. Is it fair to say that the Church cannot really be the church without the presence of people with disabilities?
2. How does building a community of belonging go beyond a warm welcome?
3. Look around your parish: Who could you engage with?

ACT

- How are you going to respond now? Choose one thing you would like to develop, change or introduce in your church.
- Who needs to be involved to make this happen?
- What is the first step?

READ

- Roy McCloughry, **The Enabled Life: Christianity in a disabling world**, (London: SPCK Publishing, 2013)
- Jean Vanier and John Swinton, **Mental Health: the inclusive church resource**, (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2014)
- Gordon Temple, **Enabling Church: a Bible-based resource towards the full inclusion of disabled people**, (London: SPCK Publishing, 2013)
- Find out more at: www.churchofscotland.org.uk/learn

This is a learning and development resource for those in our congregations who are seeking to enable those with learning disabilities to meaningfully belong to their church community. It is designed to generate discussion and can be used in a flexible way within group settings or for study by individuals. It is an extract from the very popular Learn: Eldership publication.

Learn is a congregational learning initiative devised by the Mission & Discipleship Council of the Church of Scotland www.churchofscotland.org.uk/learn

We would welcome receiving any feedback on this resource and suggestions for other resources please email us at learn@churchofscotland.org.uk

www.churchofscotland.org.uk/learn

¹ See Jean Vanier and John Swinton, *Mental Health: The inclusive church resource*, (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2014), p.51.