

Welcome, Inclusion, Respect

Following on from the publication of the Autism Guidelines, written by Ann Memmott for the Diocese of Oxford, the Diocese decided to appoint a Disability Adviser to develop the work of helping churches and church people across the Diocese to be more open to all, especially those with disabilities.

This work is being undertaken under the banner of ***Welcome, Inclusion, Respect***, which was the title of a conference held for the Diocese in May 2009. The conference looked at all aspects of disability and encouraged attendees to engage with the “theology of disability”: in other words, how our faith and our traditions influence our attitudes towards disabled people, and how our views of disability are affected by what we believe. The conference was an important starting point in getting clergy and lay people in the Diocese of Oxford thinking about ways of improving access to churches: physical access to buildings, access to information, and access to the experiences of faith and worship.

Welcome, Inclusion, Respect takes as its starting point the idea that God loves all people equally, irrespective of age, ability, race, gender, sexual orientation and so on. Christians believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for all people of all faiths and all time. So disability inclusion is not merely a matter of obeying the law - it is also morally and ethically vital, especially for people of faith.

The rationale behind the work of the Diocesan Disability Adviser is contained in the document entitled ***Welcome, Inclusion, Respect***, which can be viewed on the Diocese of Oxford website: <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/social-justice/just-care/welcome-inclusion-respect.html>

The Disability Adviser appointed by the Diocese of Oxford, Wendy Bryant, is able to advise clergy and lay people in the churches and parishes of the Diocese on any aspect of disability inclusion. Wendy works with a small team of volunteers who have a variety of experience of disability - personal or professional - in carrying out “access audits” of churches. Far from being a tickbox

exercise, these are opportunities to engage with the issues of how we make all our church activities truly accessible to everyone in our local community. For example, how does a person with dyslexia find their way to your church? How does a person with anxiety issues or a person with visual impairment know which is the main entrance door, if it is not well signed? How does a person with mental health problems who relies on public transport get there on a Sunday, when there may not be any busses? How do the Children's Church leaders welcome a child with a very short attention span, who does not want to do colouring or craft activities? How does a person with chronic pain cope with the seating in church? These are all very real issues, though not usually the first things people think of when they consider "disability access" to churches.

In November 2010 we held a resource day "Is there a place for me?" which brought together a wide variety of people wanting to explore how our churches can be more inclusive of people with learning disabilities. Attendees were welcomed at the door by people with learning disabilities, who also helped to lead the day. We explored how worship, pastoral care, teaching and nurture in our churches can be more inclusive of learning disabled people, and as a result of this event a number of new initiatives are being developed.

Work which is being planned for 2011 is a Training day for clergy and ministers in the Diocese "Enabling Church: Disability and Wholeness"; work with students on the ordination training courses; further access audits for parishes, along with continuing advice on disability inclusion, and development of resources for Confirmation for people with learning disabilities.

The Diocese of Oxford believes that this work is important because it is moving churches on from understanding that we have to become accessible in order to "allow disabled people in" to the idea that disabled people could also be leaders and ministers, whether lay or ordained. Of course, there are already disabled people in positions of leadership in churches across the Diocese - some may be recognised as disabled, others not. Some may not consider themselves to be disabled, even if they are according to the legal definition of disability. We try to respect and believe people's own definitions of their identity.

When we are challenged in our views and assumptions about disability - and what disabled people can or cannot achieve - we learn - sometimes about ourselves as much as about others. This is a big step for many of us, and it is wonderful to see this quiet revolution taking place in people's minds and hearts.

For more information on any aspect of the Diocese of Oxford's work on disability inclusion, please contact the Disability Adviser:

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Or phone 01275 848934.

Please note: usual working days are Wednesday and Friday.