

Report by Jackie Topp, Peterborough Diocesan Disability Advisor

Enabling Church

A conference addressing disability, wholeness and Christian theology

7 October 2010

I was very interested when I saw the flyer for this conference at Euston and booked my ticket well in advance of the day. The flyer told me that my thinking about disability and the engagement of disabled people with church life would become broader and deeper. Great, I thought. That's just what I wanted. As disability advisor in the diocese I am always looking for ways to enhance inclusivity for disabled people; it is not all about ramps and hearing loops after all. I also hoped to find answers to the theological issues that I grapple with weekly as a disabled person in church as I sing hymns and listen to sermons about healing and physical wholeness.

The Friends Meeting house is a large building with good access. Registration was a bit of a bun fight but eventually we sorted ourselves out and gathered in the main hall. This was a large auditorium with seating on three sides and a large central space suitable for wheelchairs. There must have been around 500 delegates, the majority disabled, and some having travelled some distance. I think the prize for furthest distance travelled went to a couple who came over especially from Belgium.

The day began with some joyous worship in song before we had our first lecture. Roy McCloughry, a lecturer in ethics from St John's College, Nottingham spoke about the theology of disability. He focused on what it means to be human; an individual with rights and choices. He then spoke of the Christian view of humanity; that we are in a relationship with God in Trinity. Roy used Luke's banquet to demonstrate the interdependence of non-disabled people with those who are disabled. He also highlighted God's recognition of us all in our differences whilst drawing us all together as a reflection of his image. The importance of the weakest people in society was put forward, and that God worked to break down barriers by integrating those who society shunned by treating them as worthy and equal in God's eyes. Roy's lecture was particularly useful as he allowed time for questions and discussion. This was not the same in other presentations, which was a shame as much can be gained from enquiry and dialogue.

Jonathan Lamb explored 2 Corinthians in some depth as he drew out the requirements of a church for all. He demonstrated how seeing, welcoming and valuing are the most important criteria for churches. His call for reading between the lines and not taking everything as it appears was a skill that needed to be practised. This is a highly pertinent observation on so many levels, not least of which of course are the bible itself, which can only be read as an interpretation; and disabled people who should not be read as a homogenous group.

After lunch John Naude, who was my predecessor in this advisory role and who now leads at a Church near Portsmouth, gave a talk on disability, wholeness and healing. This is a contentious topic for disabled people, many of whom see Jesus' healing as an assumption that living with impairment is wrong. John explained that Jesus' acts were used in the context of the day as a challenge to the Pharisees to regard him differently. John also argued that physical healing was a temporary measure here on Earth whereas the relationship with God was eternal. John questioned how God heals as well as posing the ubiquitous who, why and when questions. He answered these himself by saying if we knew all the answers then God would become boxed and predictable, which He cannot be.

I found the day useful, including the fellowship that enveloped us all, and in some of the theological explanations discussed. However, I was disappointed in one way as most of the day was spent 'preaching to the converted', if you will pardon the expression. The clergy that were there were already involved with disability in some way, so could perhaps draw out the sections of the bible that reflect disability as more positive an experience in their sermons. I wonder how much of this gets back to the 'ordinary' clergyman looking for a specific focus. I also began to consider a few of the presenters' personal stories. All had involvement in disability and many focused on their own experiences of overcoming the challenges of being a disabled person or those of a disabled family member. These were often private stories and unrelated to church activity. I therefore wondered whether the conference was really the right place for such soul bearing. At one point I even began to think the personal tragedy model of disability was alive and kicking in the room.

I then reflected on the message we learned about the importance of the weak. If weakness is viewed as strength perhaps all disabled people need to show themselves in all their weaknesses. This does not mean relinquishing our rights for independence and equality. Instead it acknowledges our mutual need to be interdependent and valued differently by those who appear to have it all. Perhaps, perversely, this is how we as disabled people can be seen to have a gift from God. It is something that we should use to make deeper and broader differences to our often very ableist churches.