

**Encounters on the Edge, No 44: Hidden Treasures  
Churches for adults with a learning difficulty**

**Written by Claire Dalpra**

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Review by Jackie Topp, Disability Advisor, Peterborough Diocese

This booklet is part of a series that aims to explore what the Church Army terms fresh expressions of Church. The meaning of fresh expressions requires four criteria to be met. The first is enculturation, not assimilation; the second is whether the Church will grow independently rather than act as a stepping stone to another church. The third asks about frequency of meetings, whilst the fourth asks about the church's identity. This edition explores churches that have been set up specifically for people with learning difficulties and which meet these criteria.

Although a small volume anyone interested in theology and disability would find this useful and interesting on many levels. Questions are raised about the nature of Church, belonging, 'normalness', relationships on human and spiritual levels, and the power struggles within every aspect of these.

The first point I must make is that unfortunately Dalpra uses the term 'learning disabilities' throughout her work. This term may be an official term in that it is used in governmental definitions; however it is not the term that people labelled as such have chosen to use themselves. With my background in disability studies and my work with people with learning difficulties I was intrigued to see how churches provided specifically for people with learning difficulties would be seen within a theological context. Also I was interested to see how someone from a non-disability background would approach this topic.

Dalpra's brief was to find out whether the churches she met may be identified as such. The four dimensions required are, is it 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic'. These ask whether people belong or merely attend; how missionary can they be in their life outside church, how can they contribute to one another's Christian development, and how can they develop their own faith. The Churches researched have found ways to address and provide for these and it must be asked how and whether such methods may be translated across to mainstream church. Certainly some can, with little expense or effort. Mainstream churches should indeed learn from these 'specific' churches about how to include 'different' people into their congregation.

Traditionally people with learning difficulties have been segregated from mainstream society. They have been viewed as 'other' and their needs have neither been understood nor adequately supported. The current Government have produced white papers that call for the inclusion of people; Valuing People (2001) and Valuing People Now (2009). These aim for inclusion of people with learning difficulties at every level, and seek to provide people with learning difficulties the support they need to have independence and control in their lives. Therefore for me, to have separate churches for people with learning difficulties is counter to these aims. Dalpra notes her awareness of this however and approaches her research with an open mind. The

questions she asks are insightful and address questions of disability and ecclesiology/theology. The balance does swing in favour of the latter but she raises some important points, both for mainstream churches and for people whose lives are dedicated to supporting people with learning difficulties.

The Churches Dalpra visits are clearly meant for people with very profound learning difficulties who may indeed struggle within mainstream church. I do not deny that there are many people who would benefit from such a church. However one question Dalpra does not ask is why the churches do not regularly invite and encourage other people to attend their church as visitors rather than as helpers. Dalpra points out that people with the greatest intellect always have the most power, which is why segregation occurred in the first place. She quotes Bredin's very apt expression that, 'arrogance of the so-called able is what disabled the disabled'. I suggest arrogance often comes with intellect, which is a measure of something that has no bearing on a person's relationship with God and only gets in the way of forming human relationships. If non-disabled people are true Christians some effort is required of them to think differently to include people who are different to them. Forming an understanding of a different culture is one way of breaking down barriers of segregation and encouraging inclusion and equality. I find it disappointing that this point was not drawn out further but as I said in my opening, the booklet is otherwise stimulating on many levels.