

Ministry as a Disabled Person in the Church of England: A Vision

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(This is an emended draft of an article that appeared in the Church Times 2012).

²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member

1 Corinthians 12:20-24 (NRSV)

You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

Leviticus 19:14 (NRSV)

In the church of the modern day, perhaps more so than any previous stage in Christian history, diversity is a key driver. By the grace of God, people of all backgrounds, experiences, outlooks, strengths and weaknesses are continuing to be drawn into communities of faith, relationships of discipleship and intimacy and drawn along into the glorious, mysterious journey of life, faith and hope that is our response to the wonderful Good News of Jesus Christ. The church has always been for all, just as Christ died once and for all, but as the Church of England seeks to maintain and develop its calling to be a Christian presence in every community, the challenge remains for us as an institution, as the Church, to reflect the wondrous beauty and diversity of God's creation and the redemptive, reconciling work of Christ in how we are led and how we lead.

As a disabled person, I find passages such as those quoted above to be both exciting and daunting. Whether I see myself as one of those parts of the body which is weaker or not (and I think this is something which is difficult for each individual person to rightly perceive about themselves), it is more than true that my journey towards and through training for ordination in the Church of England has not been an easy one. Indeed it should not be easy, not many of the most worthwhile things in life are. However, as I have been humbled, formed, taught and most importantly blessed, by both the opportunity of being at theological college and being granted the privilege of time to stop and specifically focus on growing in my relationship with God and my love for his Church, I have spent much time thinking about how disability can play a part in ministry. Not merely is disability something to be dealt with or worked around, as part of ministry. Rather I would argue it is something to be celebrated, as Paul seems to intimate in a passage from Corinthians 12

above. Disabled people are part of the Church. They should be. They must be, in order for the Church to be healthy, to truly reflect the will of God for his bride and most of all, to be holy. A church which puts a stumbling block before a disabled person, which does not allow them to fully integrate, participate and, where appropriate, lead, is not a holy church. It is not the Church that Christ envisaged, that he called us to be.

As Jesus allowed Himself to be impaired to the fullest extent possible to redeem mankind and reconcile us to God, and as He maintained His scars after His resurrection, it seems fair to suggest that those who are weaker, or who are scarred by past experiences, thoughts and feelings, follow in His footsteps. The love of God is ultimately expressed in weakness, as well as in strength. With wisdom and insight, compassion and prayerful consideration, I believe that we need to pray for healing for all, the removal of barriers to relationship with God, one another and love for oneself and one's neighbour. Sometimes God will miraculously cure conditions and illnesses, to His glory and for our good. More often though, the ultimate healing of opportunity to acknowledge our need for salvation and accept the wonderful free gift of grace is the greatest need of all who enter the lives of our church communities. As such, all are impaired. All are in need. Jesus, in weakening Himself more than any man ever has and suffering more than any of us ever will, before rising more gloriously than anyone in history, has made a remedy, that the power of that impairment can be demolished. The Church is to be the outworking of the demolishing of that impairment.

It is my contention that the Church in the UK has an opportunity perhaps greater than at any previous time in its history to be a force for social change in this generation, in this time. As social care and welfare continue to be under review and discussion, I believe it is time for the Church to take centre stage as the one of the key actors in society through which people, whatever their levels of functionality or impairment, are treated with equal levels of love, respected as creations loved by God, made to look like him, known to him by name and delightful to him. It was never God's intention for social disability to enter the world. I believe passionately that one of the key potential roles of the Church, hopefully spearheaded by the Church of England in the coming years, could be the attempt to eradicate social disablement, through loving acts of kindness, service, education, and through the grace and power of the Spirit. This is something which I think God is calling me to, calling us to, as people who work in this area in His Church. It may seem an impossible task, but nothing is impossible for our God. The day when our Churches, our communities, remove all barriers and stumbling blocks from the path of those whose functionality is not at a level that the outside world would deem "full", when someone might be able to lead the Church, regardless of their physical or emotional strengths and weaknesses if it is deemed right for them to do so, is closer than it has ever been before. Let's all work together to equip the church through its ministry and example to allow everyone in our churches in reality a) to be and feel fully part of the family of God, b) to be able to play their full part in its ministry and c) to be able fully to follow Christ's calling on their lives, wherever he may be leading them.