

## Who has a disability?

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*'Driving by a church, a ramp is a welcome mat.'*

*(Wheelchair user)*

Not so long ago, I visited an Anglican church in Sydney's northwest. As visiting speaker for the day I was shown around and invited to their communal dinner.

I was interested to meet several 'disabled' people there. (I will return to those inverted commas later.) They had various difficulties I do not normally see, and needed some help; but participating in the dinner they spoke and were spoken to as naturally as anyone else. Their wheelchairs were part of the furniture, like my own chair. So were the ramps and rails throughout the building. It was church as usual—just another meeting of God's people.

I was surprised in three ways by this scenario. First, it was so unremarkable. These members were not regarded awkwardly. They were not patronised. No one spoke at them loudly. They were folk at church, like me. Second, I was surprised (and annoyed) at my surprise. Why did I notice them so much, and why was the normalcy of the scene so interesting to me? Clearly, there was something odd in my perception, and in my experience of church until then.

My third surprise? I will return to that when I get to those inverted commas ...

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*'I do not expect to get access to the pyramids or Uluru, but I do want to get into all the library and all of the community centre.'*

*'The gym offered a separate class for kids with disabilities. I asked one of the teachers whether it would be possible for my daughter to attend one of the mainstream classes. She frowned and looked concerned, and said that was why they created the separate class. I said she was perfectly capable of joining in with the other girls. She said "well that's OK for your daughter but if we let her in we will have to let everyone else in..."'*

These excerpts are from submissions to *Shut Out: the experience of people with disabilities and their families in Australia*. This report arose from a government commissioned consultation on the lived experiences of people with disabilities. More than 2,500 people attended consultations around the country to tell their stories, and over 750 submissions were received.

Reading it arouses anger. Enormous barriers still prevent many people from participating in community life. People with disabilities do not enjoy full participation in society—but not just because of the physical aspect of their disability. The absence of ramps, rails and appropriate toilets is not the only problem. The main problem is the failure to perceive and accept these people *as people*.

After the *Shut Out* report, there are growing calls (led by the Hon. Bill Shorten) for a **National Disability Insurance Scheme** ([www.ndis.org.au](http://www.ndis.org.au)). Such a scheme would function along the lines of Medicare: compulsory contributions from all would enable anyone who has or acquires a serious disability to be financially assisted. Such a scheme would better enable those with disability to find solutions, rather than being at the mercy of the current ad-hoc, patchy and inadequate arrangements.

But an insurance scheme won't fix everything. It cannot change community attitudes. Churches are usually characterized as welcoming and caring places, and many churches like the Anglican church mentioned above are oases of sorts. But

unfortunately, many more church communities and church spaces are not yet very inclusive, and many with disabilities are inadvertently 'shut out' of church life. In Australia today, twenty percent of people are living with a disability of some kind. But think about your own church: does the number of people there with a disability reflect that wider figure?

*'For many years people with disabilities found themselves shut in—hidden away in large institutions. Now, many people with disabilities find themselves shut out—shut out of buildings, homes, schools, businesses, sports and community groups. They find themselves shut out of our way of life.'* [- from the report.]

The Anglican Church in Sydney is now committed to connecting with the many different people around us. Those with disability are one such group, but it doesn't take a lot of imagination to figure out why so few of this unseen group are found in churches.

It can be physically too hard to get to church, or to get into the building or the toilets. The format of services can be difficult for someone with chronic pain, or with a visual or hearing impairment. Small group meetings are impossible for families who have a family member with an intellectual disability or behavioural problems. Embarrassment keeps people away from church; or when they come, some feel superficially accepted but never really integrated into church life. An unintended message heard by people with a disability is that they ought to be grateful for our help, or for 'accommodating' them in some special way.

Admitting these problems can be difficult, and we can find ourselves responding with guilt, hopelessness and even some anger at having to face these things. Overstressed clergy groan inwardly at having to address yet another aspect of church life. Wardens shake their heads at the compliance issues, the monetary cost, and the endless hassle of pushing through changes to church plant and equipment. The rest of us quake inwardly at our clumsy responses to disabilities.

Nevertheless, Jesus himself seems to feel quite strongly about this matter. Triggered by the local religion's contempt for a disabled man, Jesus erupts into a series of parables that throw the boundaries way beyond that man's particular case.

*'When you give a lunch or a dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers, your relatives, or your rich neighbors, because they might invite you back, and you would be repaid. On the contrary, when you host a banquet, invite those who are poor, maimed, lame, or blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'* [Luke 14:12-14, CSB]

His confronting language about 'repayment' points to how seriously God expects us to include the vulnerable and the frail, *as people*. Jesus utterly subverts our standard ways of seeing people, as if we matter in virtue of our 'productivity', our 'social skills' or our 'success'. God will have no part of those who only associate on such terms. 'When you give a lunch or a dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers, your relatives, or your rich neighbors'—Jesus hosts no 'homogenous unit' banquets, and 'pro-life' churches have no choice other than to follow him in this.

For churches are already full of the 'disabled'—if only we could see that. This was my third surprise: why did I think of those others as any more 'disabled' than I? I will also face ill health, accident, old age; one day I will need care; and more importantly, my 'productivity', 'social skill' and 'success' mean nothing as I stand before God *in need of salvation*. My functional body masks my broken heart and my lost soul. Breaking bread

alongside those with visible disability, I learnt with them what God always knows: that we are all utterly dependent upon him, through the death of his Son for a totally 'disabled' humanity. Because and *only* because of him, churches are communities of broken people who know the hope of eternity. Churches are not service providers, or social clubs. They are people in relationship with God, and with each other in Christ.

As I write, the annual Synod of the Anglican Diocese is in session. On the Synod's agenda is an initiative to enable churches to start, or start again, at including everyone. Delegates will be introduced to and given free material from a magnificently helpful group. They have put together a set of **Luke 14** resources designed to enable 'Disability Inclusive Christian Communities'. The writers of this material have literally trawled the globe for the best of the best, to help churches in the following ways:

- Church Wardens—those practical men and women in Anglican churches who just want to know *what to do next*—will be delighted with the **Accessible Church Manual** on how to fix church buildings. It includes all the latest Australian Standards guidelines and expectations; it shows the exact slope needed on a ramp, the exact dimensions needed in a toilet, and everything practical that rectors and ministry staff can only marvel in wonder at.
- Ministers—those thoughtful shepherds who seek change in how we believe, think, feel and live—will be assisted by **Church Bar None**, a set of Bible studies with well-produced DVD visuals that constructively and helpfully edge people into the Bible's account of disability. (Those trained at a certain college where this writer works tend not to believe that pre-prepared Bible studies can be useful. I promise: *this material is an exception.*) The material can be tailored for a particular church; there is a wealth of helpful input here.
- Members—those faithful people who come regularly and want to help but often don't know how—will find a wealth of tips and tactics, such as the list of **Welcomer's Tips** for people with various kinds of disability. This material will lead us out of our awkwardness and clumsiness, into sensible ways of receiving others as *people like us*. It will show us how to 'connect' with disabled others before, during and after church.

For if we are all 'disabled', then maybe the physically disabled have a thing or two to teach us about following Jesus. Synod will see **Table Talk**, a six-minute video profiling members of churches across the land. They move us to tears, and fill us with hope. One of them, Steven, strikes the viewer as pretty different at first. But we learn of his 'bizarre' sense of humour; we quickly pick up how to hear his speech; then he looks to camera and says, 'I offer what everyone else has to offer: themselves.'

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#### **Links:**

- **Luke 14** Resources for Disability Inclusive Christian Communities (CBM Australia) [www.Luke14.cbm.org.au](http://www.Luke14.cbm.org.au). (Also follow the link to their free resources.)
- **'Shut Out':** [http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/disability/pubs/policy/community\\_consult/Documents/NDS\\_report.pdf](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/disability/pubs/policy/community_consult/Documents/NDS_report.pdf)
- Catriona Corbett, **'Caring for our disabled children':** [www.sydneyan Anglicans.net/life/relationships/caring\\_for\\_our\\_disabled\\_children](http://www.sydneyan Anglicans.net/life/relationships/caring_for_our_disabled_children)
- **National Disability Insurance Scheme:** [www.ndis.org.au](http://www.ndis.org.au)

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