

# Our all - inclusive Church?



By Sophia Nicholls\*

This article aims to raise the awareness of the issues relevant to those in our church and local community living with a disability or special need. Questions are posed as food for thought with the aim of encouraging formal discussions within the church family.

Imagine if you will ..... You are regular and active members of your local church. You might be a deacon or Sabbath School Superintendent or even the first elder. You are an active member of your church board. Imagine for a moment what it would be like to lose one of your senses. If you became blind, would you still be able to worship in your local church? Would you be able to get to church? Would you find it hard to detect where the entrance to your church was? If you lost your hearing, would you still be able to access the wonderful good news of God's Love? Would you be able to follow the church service? If you became immobile would you still be able to come to church or would you prefer to stay at home or go else- where, where you could benefit from the fellowship of those who see you as a valued member of the church family? Imagine if you will.....

## *What is a disability?*

There are approximately 8.7 million disabled people in the UK covered by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). This represents 15% of the population. Over 5.2 million disabled people are of working age – 18% of working population.

Yet disabled people are over 6 times more likely than non- disabled people to be out of work.

The DDA describes a disabled person as 'anyone with a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect upon their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'. This is meant to be a fairly wide definition and includes:

- physical impairment – this includes weakening or adverse change of a part of the body caused through illness, by accident or from birth.

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For example, amongst many other situations, *blindness, deafness, heart disease, the paralysis of a limb or severe disfigurement.*

- mental impairment – this can include learning disabilities and all recognised mental illnesses.
- substantial - this does not have to be severe, but is more than minor or trivial.
- long-term adverse effect – that has lasted or is likely to last more than 12 months.
- a normal day-to-day activity – that is, one that affects one of the following: your mobility; manual dexterity; physical co-ordination; continence; ability to lift, carry or otherwise move everyday objects; speech, hearing or eyesight; memory or ability to concentrate, learn or understand; or perception of the risk of physical danger. It does not include the ability to work because no particular form of work is 'normal' for most people.

### **Did you know? ...**

The World Health organisation states that there are over 650 million people with a disability. Gathered in one place, they would be the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest nation on earth after China and India.

As a nation this population are the ...

- Poorest
- Least educated
- Have the least access to transport
- Lowest in employment
- **Least evangelised and least church – involved nation on earth.**

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about the disabled or those with special needs? Here are some interesting statistics to consider.

- Only 5% of disable people are wheelchair users
- 1million people are registered blind
- 750,000 people cannot see well enough to read a newspaper or recognise someone across a street
- 8 million people have a degree of hearing loss
- 2.5 million use hearing aids
- 75, 000 are profoundly deaf. 1.25 million with learning disabilities

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- 410,000 people with epilepsy
- 250,000 with facial disfigurement
- 3% of children under 16 have one or more disabilities
- 1 person in 3 will have a mental illness
- 1 in 4 households is affected by disability
- 95% of the population will experience disability at some point in their lives.

**Your membership: *What is your attitude towards those with a disability?***

There are two models of disability which summarise our different attitudes towards those with a disability.

- ❖ The Medical Model focuses on **limitations, inabilities** and on the medical details of disability. This model assumes disabled people have a problem which needs to be fixed or cured. Those who hold to this model creates a result in disabled people being seen as dependent and as needing 'looking after' removing personal choice.
- ❖ The Social model focuses on the effect that society and poor built environments creates marginalisation and lack of access. It also assumes that society and the surrounding environment need to be changed to enable disabled people to participate fully. Thus resulting in an **independent, fully accepted member of the society** and the church body.

The application of the social model has led to the growth of independent living thus the person with the disability retains control of their lives.

Which model do you support?

How does your attitude affect your personal ministry and the ministry of your local church?

Are the Gifts and talents of people with disabilities welcomed in your congregation and community?

## **Your church Building: 20 Questions**

This is a very basic checklist to alert you to the possible difficulties in the accessibility of your church building. ASNA would like to encourage all SDA establishments to carry out an audit of their church's facilities to assess its current position in light of the Disability Discrimination Act 2004. We would want to suggest that this act must be viewed as an opportunity to reassess our churches facilities and services as all members who use the facilities will benefit from any necessary improvements. This is not an exhaustive list but can be used as a guide for church assessment.

1. Is there a parking bay for those with a disability in the church car park or immediately outside the church entrance?
2. Is it possible to get from a parked car to any area in the building without going up or down a step or stairs?
3. Are paths of a continuous common surface, not interrupted by step?
4. Are steps easy to see?
5. Are there ramps with hand rails?
6. Is there at least one primary entrance to each building usable by wheelchair users?
7. Can doors be opened easily?
8. Is the floor level each side of doors?
9. Can the service be heard clearly?
10. Is there an induction loop for hearing aid users?
11. Is there adequate lighting arranged to prevent shadows on those speaking?
12. If an OHP /LCD projector is used, are there large print paper copies available for people unable to see the screen?
13. Is there space for wheelchair users in the sanctuary?
14. Are there seats with arms and large leg room for people with mobility impairments?
15. Can people take part in the communion service without taking steps?
16. Can someone in a wheel chair be baptised?
17. Is there an accessible toilet for wheelchair users?
18. Can a disabled person access refreshments or a telephone?
19. Are there large print bibles or hymnals available for use?
20. Is there a room or facilities for families with children with a disability to go if necessary?

### ***Is our church complete?***

Revisit 1 Corinthians 12: 22 – 23 as you ponder this question. This chapter helps us determine the make up of our church body. Most churches have difficulty in ministering to disabled people simply because of some basic fears and lack of awareness. Moving past these attitudinal barriers and misunderstandings we'll discover the joy of caring for someone simply based on the preciousness of their souls, not on their physical attractiveness and intellectual capabilities or social position.

References and further reading:

- Am I beautiful or what: Outreach and ministry to people with learning difficulties by David Potter ISBN 1 85999 202 1
- Hearts in Motion: a four lesson bible study for disability awareness by Steven Jensen Through the Roof publication
- Disability awareness training pack by Sophia Nicholls, ASNA publication

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### **ASNA Mission Statement**

To support people living with special needs and disabilities.

ASNA is a membership charity (launched in 2001 by parents, carers and people with disabilities) for people living with disabilities and special needs. ASNA also works to empower people interested in the spiritual, physical, emotional and social welfare of adults and children with special needs and disabilities by providing training and awareness workshops and other educational programmes.

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