

How to host a Luke 14 Banquet

The challenge

At a time when the world will be celebrating the achievements of the Paralympians, there is a perfect way for churches to celebrate the diversity of their own community. And to extend a welcome to people with disabilities living within their reach.

A big idea

Here's a big idea that is immediately appealing and which originated with the most creative evangelist ever – Jesus himself.

'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'

In Luke 14 we read that though the guests of a big party make their excuses, the Master remains determined that his 'house will be full'. He tells his servants to go out into the community and bring in disabled and disadvantaged people. The house is filled with those who rarely got invited to any parties!

Many churches are already blessed to have people with a range of disabilities within their congregations, of course. But the **Luke 14 Banquet** is about –

- Reaching out into the community and inviting people to a celebratory event.
- Hosting a party that expresses generous hospitality to those not already in the church congregation
- Specifically inviting people who are too often overlooked when we plan our church activities.

Hosting a Luke 14 Banquet reflects Jesus' heart to include everyone – a key value that his Church should be demonstrating.

It might be new to you, but the **Luke 14 Banquet** is far from an original idea; many churches across the United States include this as a regular feature of their church calendar.

Here's the opportunity

The Paralympics is the backdrop for this exceptional opportunity to reach out to people with disabilities in their localities. This can include ...

- People who are blind and partially sighted
- People who are deaf or have hearing loss
- Wheelchair users and others with mobility challenges,

- People with autism, learning disabilities or mental health issues,
- People with dementia
- Others who often find themselves marginalised in our society.

What better way to demonstrate the inclusive love of Jesus Christ than this!

Inviting people to a **Luke 14 Banquet** means the opportunity to reach out to disabled people and so:

- Serving them at a meal which celebrates the unity we can find in the diversity of humanity;
- Showing them respect and love;
- Affirming the dignity of all people as made in God's image;
- Demonstrating that the Gospel is hope for all;
- Showing that their local church has an open door and welcomes them in the name of Jesus, the Saviour of all.

What an opportunity to come together, as people of differing abilities, all on equal terms!

Getting practical

The size and scope of the event can be adapted to your resources. Be sure to model the message by making sure your **Luke 14 Banquet** is really accessible and inclusive. There's a really useful guide at www.morethangold.org.uk/inclusive

Here are some ideas to get you started:

Draw up a guest list. Identify people with disabilities in your community with whom you don't yet have contact.

Some may be known personally to church members. Is there a local club for blind people? Or other disability groups already meeting locally? Get in touch with sheltered housing or residential homes for people with learning disabilities, and local day centres.

What about contacting your local social services department? Or using the internet to identify local groups?

Some churches have disability groups meeting in their premises but have little contact with them. So here's an opportunity to make the link.

Plan transport for guests. This may well be a significant issue, involving a team of volunteer drivers or making use of charity-run local minibuses or accessible taxis.

Draw together a group to do the catering. Many churches already have a small group who organise catering for events, so get them mobilised. Remember to ensure catering is done to appropriate hygiene standards.

Recruit a big team of welcomers and befrienders. Some people will come with their carers – but the carers too need welcoming. So you may need as much as a 1:1 ratio of welcomers and befrienders to guests. See

how many people will commit to being befrienders and then set the size of the guest list.

If your church isn't that big, think about working with other church.

Think about a programme Food, of course – and depending on your resources your banquet table can be modest (afternoon tea and cakes/ pizza and fruit juice/ a picnic in the church grounds/ a barbecue) or more elaborate (a three-course candlelit meal with all the trimmings including an after-dinner speaker).

Do remember to have gluten free and vegetarian food available for anyone who comes with a food allergy or intolerance.

Be as generous as you can in expressing the Christian virtue of hospitality.

Be creative Can you invite a Christian experiencing disability to give a short talk? Could the young people of the church put on some musical or creative items?

Think about who among those invited can contribute from their own talents. If the guest list is mainly elderly people, a community singsong often goes down well.

What about a sports-related quiz in teams? Or hire a big screen? You could screen some of the Paralympic events or show DVD interviews with Paralympians (see below for information on such a DVD).

Think about what talent your church has and put it to work. Although enthusiasm is as important as skill, make sure that what is presented is of the highest quality possible – which will underline to your guests that you have put care into giving them something special.

Think about the best venue and facilities Of course, you need to make sure what you put on is accessible to the various guests coming.

If you plan singing then think about making the song words available large print – and in Braille too if needed. (Torch Trust offers help – contact info@torchtrust.org).

Does your venue have a hearing loop for people with hearing loss?

Can wheelchair users get in an around?

There's guidance from *Churches for All* on www.churchesforall.org.uk.

If your church doesn't have accessible facilities, all is not lost. Consider what other venue is available locally.

Give the invitations This is always much better done by personal visit or face-to-face contact. Though time-consuming, this will guarantee a warmer response.

Consider follow-up Having contacted so many people for this event, how will you be in touch with them again?

More ideas and resources

If you live in one of the UK's capital cities, you could time your **Luke 14 Banquet** to coincide with the torch-lighting ceremonies happening on Friday 24th August (London), Saturday 25th August (Belfast), Sunday 26th August (Edinburgh) and Monday 27th August (Cardiff).

If not, you can join in with something else your city or town is doing. There should be local live TV coverage which could be shown on a large screen. Or, if you are on the Torch Relay route, time your event for that; or with the Flame Celebrations taking place over the August Bank Holiday in 33 UK communities.

Details of your locality's involvement are at www.morethangold.org.uk/torchrelay . There are also more ideas at www.morethangold.org.uk/outreach/community-festivals

You could hold your own version of a Flame Celebration – hanging lanterns in your hall or in your church garden or lighting a huge candle as the centrepiece of your banquet.

Undeclared is a DVD produced by the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) that includes compelling interviews with Paralympians who are Christians that can be shown on a large screen. A subtitled version is included. It's available from www.morethangold.org.uk/webshop .

Consider giving guests a 'goodie bag' to take home. This may need to be personalised to take into account different disabilities and personalities. It could include information about the church, or your current church magazine, maybe a candle.

If the budget allows, give those for whom it would be appropriate a copy of the *Sports Good News Bible* produced by Bible Society or the *On Your Marks* booklet which contains Mark's Gospel and Olympic-themed evangelistic messages, produced by the Deo Gloria Trust.

There is a wide range of publications including **More Than Conquerors** – a specially produced booklet with testimonies from Paralympians and a Gospel message all at www.morethangold.org.uk/webshop For those with sight loss, Torch Trust can provide alternatives in braille, audio and giant print formats.

For the Future

If this works well you may want to make it a regular feature in your church life – maybe for one disabled group or another. Several *Churches for All* partners support national networks of local church disability-focussed groups. For more information visit www.churchesforall.org.uk.

More Resources

Churches for All (CfA) is an umbrella grouping of various Christian organisations working with a range of disabilities (churchesforall.org.uk). On the website you can find links to the leading national Christian organisations working with disabled people and access their resources.

The newly published resource book **Enabling Church** is highly recommended for any church group wanting to engage with disabled people in the community in meaningful ways. It includes many real and insightful experiences of people with various disabilities as well as discussion starters and group activities. *Enabling Church* by Gordon Temple with Lin Ball is available from SPCK at £7.99 (on Amazon) and from Torch Trust in Braille, audio and giant print.

