**How can (my church) learn from experiences during lockdown so that disabled people can more fully play their part in church in the future?**

**Introduction**

When we went into lockdown in March 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic, everyone’s life was affected. The Government’s message to ‘stay home’ meant that non-disabled people experienced the restricted and socially isolating lives experienced by many disabled people all year round. It was an opportunity for non-disabled people to learn a little about living with disability. We need to make sure that we do not forget these lessons and leave disabled people behind, as lockdown restrictions are increasingly lifted.

Jesus spent much of His earthly ministry with people on the margins, speaking with them, befriending them and sometimes healing them. Sick and disabled people have lived experiences that can teach us, among other things, about having our worth in Jesus and about being vulnerable, which then gives others ‘permission’ to be real and vulnerable themselves.

This leaves us with a number of questions:

* How can we in (my church) learn from our personal lockdown experience to increase our understanding of the individual lives of disabled people?
* How can we continue to use new technology options eg Zoom and live streaming services, developed because of not being able to physically attend church and other activities?
* How can we continue to work towards a church where everyone participates?
* How can (my church) not only **reach out to**, but also **receive from** disabled people?

**Approach**

1. Disabled people and their needs; a clear understanding of disability.
2. Disabled people’s experiences of lockdown compared to non-disabled people’s experiences.
3. Coming out of lockdown – disabled vs non-disabled people’s expectations.
4. How well do we know our church family?
5. A way forward for (my church).
6. **What is disability?**

The Equality Act 2010 defines a person as being as disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on the person’s ability to do normal daily activities. ‘Substantial’ is more than minor or trivial, e.g. it takes much longer than it usually would to complete a daily task like getting dressed. ‘Long-term’ means 12 months or more, e.g. a breathing condition that develops as a result of a lung infection.

Disabled people are all different and include people with sensory impairments, energy impairments, learning disabilities, joint or limb problems, chronic physical illness, mental health conditions, dementia and those who are non-neurotypical (including those who identify with Autism or Aspergers). Some disabled people require an amount of care provided by others every day and some are employed, drive a car and need less support in their daily lives. We need to see each disabled person as an individual, with their own needs but also gifts to share. We should help to tackle the different barriers that they, and those people involved in their care, face in becoming fully part of the church family.

According to the Family Resources Survey for the 2018/19 financial year published on 26 March 20201, twenty-one per cent (14.1 million) of people reported a disability in 2018/19. Of these people who

reported a disability, 48% identified a mobility impairment as the specific impairment that applied to their circumstances. The next two highest categories were impairments in stamina/breathing/fatigue and then mental health (27%). Do churches in general, and (my church) in particular, have a 1 in 5 membership of disabled people? The answer is probably ‘no’. That could be because there are people sitting in our churches who have a disability and we just don’t know about it and also because disabled people don’t come to our church.

1. **Disabled people’s experiences of lockdown compared to non-disabled people’s experiences**

‘Everyone is in the same storm, but not everyone is in the same boat’.

Lockdown in March 2020 affected everyone differently. For those without a disability, some people became very busy, with extra demands in their work alongside home schooling, childcare or other caring responsibilities. At the opposite extreme, others experienced being furloughed or a loss of their job, more time than they have maybe ever had before, and a reduction in their income, including relying on state benefits for the first time.

Just like non-disabled people, all disabled people have experienced lockdown differently. Some were in employment, which may have continued or not, and others had day care or other activities to attend, which stopped. Some had regular carers or support which was reduced or stopped. Families have had to fill the essential care gaps, whilst those without available family support have had to go without essential services, such as help to wash, dress, cook and eat. Those with dementia or learning disabilities may have not understood why their lives have changed, why they cannot have physical and close contact with family and friends and why their carers are now looking different due to wearing PPE. But many were already used to a slower pace of life, depending on others to get their shopping and medication and being more socially isolated due to the difficulties of getting out.

Everyone experienced change and restrictions in their daily lives and, depending on their ability to manage technology, greater or lesser social isolation. Non-disabled people who have had to shield because they are medically vulnerable, or those shielding because of living with someone who is disabled or medically vulnerable, have experienced for themselves what it means to be unable to leave the house, to have to rely on others for shopping, and to be dependent upon people coming to them, rather than being able to go to them. Some have accessed church Zoom meetings during the lockdown, whereas others have been ‘Zoomed out’ due to their work or juggling work and family life, and haven’t had the capacity to access online church. Some disabled people struggle with technology or the requirements of Zoom; whilst others have been enabled to participate in society and church to a greater extent than they have for years.

1. **Coming out of lockdown – disabled vs non disabled people’s expectations**

Many non-disabled people will be looking forward to going back to church and church activities as they were before, meeting up in person rather than online. But for disabled people, there will be more of a mixed response. Those disabled people whose technology and language limitations mean that they have not felt part of the church family may feel keen to return to physical services. Alternatively, the isolation experienced by not connecting with the church family over many months may have created such a gap that some will be too nervous or disengaged to return to church. For those who, due to illness, disability or caring roles, previously found it difficult to regularly attend church services, will be sad to see the online connection with the church family taken away.

There are a variety of reasons why some people find online church more accessible than physical attendance. Those who are medically vulnerable or disabled and still shielding will not want or be able to leave the house for some time to come. Some people with autism or with anxiety issues have felt ‘safer’ using technology rather than meeting at church. Both physical attendance at church and social interaction can be physically and mentally draining for people with chronic illness or conditions such as autism. Some have found online group discussion easier (less threatening), making it easier to contribute (talking to their screen) where they would normally have remained quiet.

It is important that as the church gets busy reopening services and activities, the people who don’t return are not forgotten or left out. We should consider what online provision can continue, in particular, ongoing live streaming of services, Zoom attendance at house groups, PCC meetings and other church meetings, and perhaps linking together people with similar support needs. At the same time, physical meetings are important, and, in particular, sharing Holy Communion. Are we making sure that people who struggle to attend church physically can still receive Holy Communion and be visited by their church leaders? How do we get the balance of sharing fellowship together - able and disabled, physically and online?

1. **How well do we know our church family?**

There may be many people in our church who have needs that are going unspoken, or who cannot attend because of unmet needs. Although we may be aware of those in the church family with physical disabilities, many disabilities are hidden, such as mental illness or chronic health conditions, and so we cannot assume that we are meeting everyone’s needs. We need to create a culture where it is easier for people to speak about their needs, where it is okay to ‘not be okay’ or to have needs that are different from those of others, in the confidence that they will be heard and accommodations made for their needs. For some people it is a challenge to talk about their disability and share their needs, so unless they are confident of support, they are not likely to ask for their access needs to be met.

This places importance on getting to know people, asking questions and not assuming we know what would be helpful for them or what they might want to do in terms of serving the church family. It means we need to prioritise dealing with people’s access needs, which in turn means having a leadership team that believes in accessibility.

Another relevant issue is the attitudes of those within the congregation, who may have come to expect a ‘good’ or ‘professional’ church service. Opening up participation to those with some disabilities may be challenging to the current way of doing things and will require us to be open-minded and open-hearted. Have we at (my church) shown any videos of those with disabilities talking about their experiences of lockdown? When people see disabled people involved in services and other activities, it raises awareness and starts to change the mindset.

The current leadership team cannot be expected to consider all disability needs and how to accommodate them. Like the early church addressing the needs of their widows, a dedicated team is needed to support disabled people in participating in church. This is likely to mean a small team, made up of people with a range of disabilities or experience in supporting people with disabilities, who can speak up and be a voice for disabled people, acting as a bridge between disabled people and the church. They can make sure the leadership listen and are proactive; even more effective would be to have a member of this team/a disabled person on the leadership team.

1. **Some possible ideas of a way forward (pick those that are relevant for your church) and add others that are not included.**
2. **Using technology**. How can we continue to use these new skills (eg Zoom and live streaming) to benefit the whole church community – those who can physically attend services and activities and those who can’t? For example, we may continue to livestream services so that those who can’t physically attend can still participate in worship with others. What about doing Zoom home groups or PCC meetings or prayer meetings?
3. **New online church members** - One of the things we may not know is who has joined us at church services and activities online. These may be people who have never previously had any involvement in a church, or those who work on a Sunday and couldn’t attend church or those who care for someone and couldn’t leave that person to come to church, as well as those with disabilities. There should be a strategy to continue to engage with all those that have benefitted from (my church)’s online offerings, so that once physical services and activities resume, we don’t ‘lose’ these online church members. We should also avoid thinking that online provision is the answer for disabled people, and still provide support for them to come to 'physical' worship and church activities. Both options need to continue.
4. **Existing church members currently staying online** - There are people who, pre-Covid, attended physical church, but now, either due to shielding, because they or a family member are medically vulnerable, or because of anxiety of mixing in large inside groups or for other reasons, are not returning to attending physical services. Do we know why they are not returning? Do we know what online service and other provision would be helpful for them? Do they still need shopping and other practical support?
5. **Pastoral support** - During lockdown some disabled and housebound church family members may have received practical support, such as food shopping and medication collection, and emotional support through technology, phone calls, cards and socially distanced visits. Churches have found isolated people and those with limited physical access to church and been supporting and befriending them. While recognising that this is demanding on people’s time and resources, is there a way that this can continue once physical services and activities resume. People with physical disabilities, who are unable to leave the house themselves, can, if they want, be included in providing some of this support, by being on a team to contact others by phone, writing cards and sending WhatsApp messages.
6. Learning from the lockdown time – This would be a good time to:
7. Carry out a **survey of disabilities and additional needs** within the congregation (see suggested survey for all church members and suggested questionnaire for those with disabilities).
8. **Create a Disability Inclusion Team** to look at the disability issues within (my church) that become visible in the results of the survey and questionnaire and in other ways. This team can also be the focal point for welcoming to the church those with disabilities and additional needs.
9. **Raise awareness of disability** across the church through training for those in the leadership and those within the church family. Preaching input on disability would also be beneficial (either by guest speakers or in house teaching). Inclusion is not just about having physically accessible buildings. It’s not just about signage, accessibility of information, information on the church website referring to disability either. It includes the attitudes we have once disabled people get inside the building. We want to encourage all church members to build relationships, contribute as they wish and are able, and to feel a sense of belonging to the church community.
10. **Participation of disabled people.** We encourage people to use the gifts and skills that God has given us, but do we do that well for disabled people? Perhaps we firstly look at what we can do for them and not how they can contribute (with support if needed) and share their gifts. Sadly, too often, people assume that because someone is in a wheelchair or is non-verbal, they can’t contribute in a particular way. Depending on their disability, many disabled people cannot find their identity and security from successful careers, their appearance and fitness, always being busy and serving others. They have much to teach us in this respect. We should be encouraging disabled people to teach us about these things, as well as to serve in ways that they want to serve.

The Bible says, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. We need to ask whether the way we treat disabled people is the way we want to be treated.

(1The Family Resources Survey is a continuous household survey which collects information on a representative sample of private households in the United Kingdom. Detailed information is recorded on each respondent: their incomes, from all sources including self-employment; housing tenure; caring needs and responsibilities; disability; expenditure on housing; education; pension participation; childcare; family circumstances; child maintenance. The survey for the 2018/19 financial year represents the findings from 19,000 households.)