

# We need to hear voices of disabled



**Canon Amanda Collinson**, our diocesan disability adviser, argues we need to embrace the full diversity within our congregations

ASK anyone in the Church, and they'll probably tell you their vision is to be a community that everyone can participate in and find acceptance.

Ask the same people how they help those with disabilities be fully part of their congregation, and their responses are likely to centre on ramps, hearing loops and disabled toilets.

But of course disability embraces so much more than that. There is such a range of embodiment, sensory and cognitive ability, and of neurodiversity across our diocese – much of which we rarely think about. And yet we should, as 70 per cent of disabilities are hidden!

What happens to the visually impaired if our service books have tiny print and our screens are too far away? What happens to the person with autism whose style of worshipping can't be confined to reading formal liturgy or feels unable to shake hands at the peace? What happens to the individual who is hard of hearing, who arrives at your church and finds no hearing loop or effective sound system?

We are – and should be – committed to breaking down barriers and creating pathways to help disabled people to contribute fully to the life of the Church. It's

actually an issue of Kingdom justice and part of our calling.

And we follow the example of Jesus, whose ministry involved the sick and disabled being brought from the margins into the spotlight. Like him, we want to give honour to those who have traditionally been dishonoured within our society, despite being made in the image of God.

But it's not enough just to allow the disabled to experience worship. We also want to have representation on our PCCs and other leadership areas, and to understand their perspectives as key church personnel.

## **We want to give honour to those who have been dishonoured**

Every disabled person in our congregation has a unique insight or gift to offer and we need to make sure they can use them. So how might we do that? Firstly, we may need to repent of an attitude that marginalises those whose bodies and minds don't fit into a narrow definition of 'normal'.

We can also recognise that disabled people aren't represented in some

of our decision-making forums, and that their rich potential isn't encouraged to flourish. And we should discover ways of enabling disabled people and ensuring their perspective is included in all we do and say in our world and society.

We could perhaps offer diverse styles of service across a benefice or a deanery, which may appeal to different kinds of people – perhaps a quiet service for those with sensory sensitivities, or visually enriched services for those with different learning needs.

But equally, we shouldn't exclude them from 'regular' worship either. I help lead Deaf Church once a month at Holy Trinity, Fareham, but those who attend are usually part of a 'home' congregation as well.

As a diocese, we want to create a Disability Working Group that might help us to think about some of these issues and to promote radical change. If that's something you are interested in, do contact me on [amanda.collinson@portsmouth.anglican.org](mailto:amanda.collinson@portsmouth.anglican.org) to find out more.

I would also encourage you to check out an exhibition called 'Seeking the Disabled Christ' by Rachel Holdforth, a Christian artist who is disabled and neurodivergent. She has created this exhibition based on her own life, faith and experience – see [www.wobblygoose.com](http://www.wobblygoose.com)