

Theology of Disability: A Mission Made Possible

An information leaflet for parishes

Why does this matter?

Around **15% of people in the UK live with a registered disability**, yet disabled people are **significantly under-represented in our congregations**. This raises an uncomfortable but necessary question:

If disabled people are not present in our churches, what might that say about our mission?

The Church is called to proclaim the gospel to *all* people. When disabled people are absent, it is not simply a pastoral issue – it is a **missional and theological one**.

Who are ‘disabled people’?

Disability is often narrowly understood, commonly associated with wheelchair use. In reality, disability includes a wide and diverse range of experiences, including:

- Physical disabilities
- Deafness or hearing loss
- Visual impairment or blindness
- Learning disabilities
- Hidden disabilities such as epilepsy, arthritis, mental ill-health, dyslexia, or HIV/AIDS

Disability affects people of **all ages, genders, social backgrounds and ethnicities**. Many disabilities are not immediately visible, yet they profoundly shape people’s lives and experiences of church.

How has the Church responded?

Historically, the Church has played an important role in challenging society’s treatment of disabled people. Yet today, the Church often **lags behind wider society** in its understanding and inclusion.

Disabled people are frequently viewed:

- As recipients of charity rather than contributors to the Body of Christ
- Through the lens of their medical condition rather than their God-given gifts
- As people to be ‘fixed’ or ‘healed’, rather than welcomed and valued

While some disabled people seek healing prayer, the Church must never:

- Assume what kind of healing is needed
- Blame individuals for a lack of faith if healing does not occur

Our theology must be rooted in grace, not judgement.

Rethinking disability: three models

1. The Medical Model

This model sees disability primarily as a problem within the individual – something to be cured, corrected, or normalised. It often unintentionally reduces people to their diagnosis.

2. The Social Model

Many disabled people understand disability as something created by **barriers in society**, rather than by their impairment. For example:

- A wheelchair does not prevent someone entering a church
- **Steps without a ramp do**

Here, the problem lies not with the person, but with inaccessible buildings, systems, and attitudes.

3. The Relational Model (a Christian perspective)

As Christians, we go further. We believe human beings are created for **relationship**:

- Relationship with God (vertical)
- Relationship with one another (horizontal)

Disability does not diminish a person's identity or worth. All are made in the **image of God**, called into restored relationship through Jesus Christ, and gifted for life together in the Church.

Disabled people and the Body of Christ

In **1 Corinthians 12**, St Paul reminds us that every part of the Body of Christ is needed. Disabled people are **not a burden to be carried**, but vital members who:

- Reflect God's image
- Bring unique gifts and insights
- Strengthen the whole Church

When disabled people are excluded, the Church is poorer for it – spiritually, pastorally, and missionally.

A gospel issue

Disabled people need to hear – clearly and consistently – that:

- They are welcomed by God
- They are separated from God by **sin**, not by disability
- They belong in the Church, not at its margins

If barriers prevent disabled people from hearing the gospel, then removing those barriers becomes a **gospel imperative**.

What can parishes do?

- **Examine attitudes** as well as buildings
- Ask disabled people what they need – and listen carefully
- See accessibility as mission, not inconvenience
- Look for gifts, vocations, and leadership, not just needs
- Pray for healing with humility, sensitivity, and trust in God's grace

Opening our doors must go hand-in-hand with opening our hearts.

Reflection questions for PCCs

Use these questions to support prayerful discussion and discernment within your PCC or leadership team:

1. Who is not present in our congregation, and why might that be?
 2. How visible are disabled people in the life, worship, and leadership of our church?
 3. Do we tend to see disabled people primarily as recipients of care, or as contributors to the Body of Christ?
 4. What assumptions do we make about disabled people's abilities, faith, or needs?
 5. How confident are we that our worship, teaching, and pastoral care are accessible to people with a range of disabilities?
 6. Where might our attitudes – consciously or unconsciously – create barriers to belonging?
 7. How does our understanding of healing, prayer, and suffering reflect the grace of God?
 8. What might God be calling our parish to change, let go of, or prioritise in order to be more inclusive?
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Parish accessibility and inclusion checklist

This checklist is not about perfection, but about **intentional, prayerful progress**.

Welcome and culture

- ☐ We actively communicate that disabled people are welcome and valued
- ☐ Disabled people are spoken of respectfully in sermons, prayers, and notices
- ☐ We avoid defining people by their impairment or medical condition

Listening and participation

- ☐ We ask disabled people about their access needs rather than making assumptions
- ☐ Disabled people are encouraged to use and develop their gifts
- ☐ Opportunities for leadership, ministry, and service are genuinely open to all

Worship and pastoral care

- ☐ Our services consider hearing, sight, mobility, and cognitive accessibility
- ☐ We offer prayer for healing with sensitivity and without judgement
- ☐ Pastoral care recognises the whole person, not just their disability

Buildings and practical access

- ☐ We know where our building presents physical barriers
- ☐ We have a plan to address access issues where possible
- ☐ We clearly communicate what access is available

Mission and witness

- ☐ We see accessibility as part of our gospel mission, not an optional extra
- ☐ We review our practices regularly, not just once
- ☐ We pray for wisdom, humility, and courage to change

A mission made possible

The Church's mission is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to all people. That mission is incomplete if disabled people are overlooked, excluded, or unintentionally marginalised.

Opening our doors and hearts to disabled people is not simply about compliance or kindness. It is about faithfulness to the gospel.

This mission is made possible not by our own strength, but by the love of Christ, who welcomes each of us and calls us into the fullness of life together.

Leaflet adapted from a paper by Revd John Naudé

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