

# INTRODUCTION

We can thank God that we are all made differently and each of us has a unique place in his world. But what does that mean in reality when we talk about our church activities being accessible to all? The vast majority of people can walk into a church, learn about God's Word, worship and share fellowship. However, what about those whose intellectual understanding makes sermons meaningless, whose anxieties cause them to rush around or whose legs will not allow them to climb the steps to the front door? Is it possible to have an inclusive church where God's love will be demonstrated to all, a church where all are welcome and barriers to access are dismantled?

This book will give you some ideas and tools to make your church and its activities welcoming to children with special needs and their families, a place where all can learn about our amazing God.



# NUTS AND BOLTS

## What do we mean by 'special needs'?

The term 'special needs' is very broad and is used to describe needs that a child has, that will require extra help in one, or more than one, area. The term 'Special Educational Needs' has a legal definition. Children with special educational needs all have learning difficulties or disabilities that make it harder for them to learn than most children of the same age. These children may need extra or different help from that given to other children of the same age. This extra help may be needed because of a range of needs, such as in thinking and understanding, physical or sensory difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties, difficulties with speech and language, or how they relate to and behave with other people.

The special needs we encounter amongst the children we are working with might be temporary, like a child who has broken a leg or a child experiencing a bereavement. However, we generally think of special needs as being of a permanent nature, such as Down's syndrome which will affect learning, or physical disability, for instance, cerebral palsy. Many groups may include children with Dyspraxia or Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) where the children can be impulsive and lively.

All children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, ASD, share a number of impairments, some more noticeable than others. They find it hard to understand and use non-verbal and verbal communication, and to understand social behaviour. This affects their ability to interact with children and adults. It is hard for them to think and behave flexibly, which may be shown in restricted, obsessional or repetitive activities.

Whether permanent or temporary we need to provide extra help to the individual with a special need. This may mean extra resources such as helpers, special equipment or ramps. More commonly it means extra

care in adapting materials and activities to make them accessible.

### **Why do we need to think about this?**

Each day more than 60 children are born or diagnosed with a serious disability. There are around 555,000 children/young people in the UK who have some form of disability and/or chronic illness.



Yet, as we look around most churches there tend to be fewer people with special needs than these statistics would suggest. This is a largely unreached group who need to be given opportunities to learn of a God who loves them so much that Jesus died for them. Jesus met people where they were. He shared stories with them and posed questions, giving time and space for all people to answer. He talked directly to people and physically touched them. Think of children who come into a church only to find that the talk is directed above their heads to 'able' people. These are the children who may feel separate, ignored or even mocked by others in their school, clubs or community. Of all places, church should be a very different and welcoming experience for them.

Often it is the attitude that underlies their welcome to church that makes someone with special needs decide whether or not to return, rather than difficulties with a step or the sound system. Frequently, families who have a child with a disability try numerous churches in search of a place where they feel accepted and where they may all be able to relax and worship without being judged! Many families have given up altogether on finding a church for the whole family. Family members take it in turns to stay at home with their child with a disability. Alternatively, parents never sit through a whole service because they always have to leave with their child to take them for a walk or join them in the children's group. There are so many battles for

families with a child who has a disability, that the battle to find a church becomes one battle too many!

## **What is the Disability Discrimination Act?**

It has often been the need to concur with new legislation that has driven churches to make premises, activities and services inclusive. We do indeed need to make sure that we make the Christian church truly open to all. But it would be wonderful if the secular world looked to churches to see how to be truly inclusive.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) gives us a definition of disability as 'a physical or mental impairment, which has substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'. It includes disabilities such as: severe disfigurement, impairments helped by artificial aids, progressive conditions and genetic predispositions.

The DDA states what our duties are. In brief:

- Since December 1996 it has been unlawful to treat a person less favourably because of their disability.
  - Since October 1999 we have needed to make reasonable adjustments to the service we provide (for example, give extra help, change the way we do things, have written policies and procedures and provide auxiliary aids such as hearing loops).
  - Since October 2004 we have needed to make reasonable adjustments to physical features such as doorways, steps and toilets.
- What we need to do will vary according to our resources, what we have to offer and the effect of disability on the individual child. We must be 'reasonable' in our decisions and actions. We can refuse to include certain people for health and safety reasons but we would need

to have clear, written reasoning for this and have tried to find a 'safe' alternative. We could also refuse entry to someone if their inclusion would lead to no service for others because of the costs, both financial and in staffing. We are able to offer a slightly different service if other options have been considered and this is the best option.

These duties laid out are both anticipatory and continuing. This means that we need to consider possible changes to be made, even if we do not yet need to or cannot alter things now for the current congregation. Who knows who will come along to church next Sunday with a special need we have not even considered?

It is important that we remember that the DDA covers children as well as adults and it makes no difference if it is volunteers providing a service (which is usually the case in churches). We are still expected to comply.

### **Attitude changing**

- ***Treat with dignity and respect***

In all we do, we need to think about dignity, equality and respect. Are we being respectful of all people, treating them equally? One church, trying to provide for a wheelchair-user put up a shower curtain instead of a door in one cubicle in the ladies' loos. This church member had been unable to shut the toilet door. This did enable her to use the toilet independently but does it cater for her dignity and respect?

- ***Don't rush to do everything***

It is often easier and quicker to do something for someone else rather than give people time and opportunities to do it for themselves. How do we feel if things are always done for us and we are made to feel inferior? How do we learn about God if we are not given an opportunity to explore for



### **In reality...**

A church in Bracknell appointed someone to co-ordinate the work with children with special needs who gathers useful information and then decides how best to include each child with a disability. Extra resources are made, bought or adapted. Helpers are drawn in and trained to give support. For example, a child with autism has a helper to sit with them at the back during worship time which allows the child to move around and worship in their own way. The helper goes with the child to the children's group and may stand at the back while the child watches or sits with them to do a puzzle. The helper may adapt the teaching to make it relevant and motivating.

ourselves? Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche communities where people with disabilities live alongside non-disabled people, said: 'Loving someone is not about doing things for them but revealing to them that they are precious.'

### **In reality...**

In a church in Guildford, it was decided that the main service was not catering for some children with special needs which meant that their families missed out too. They set up a monthly group for these children. Some families brought their children at the start of the service so that they could go into the main service to worship. Other families brought their child after the worship time.