



What is life like if you or someone in your family is disabled or has learning difficulties? And what can your parish do to make a difference?

What is Life Like?

'Thomas has autism. He went to church for some time with his parents. However, as he got older he became more noisy and disruptive, usually during quiet periods at Mass. The discreet disapproval of the congregation made his parents reluctant to bring him to church and now he no longer comes.'

What can be done so that Thomas and his parents are not excluded?

'John is a person with Downs Syndrome and has been an altar server in his local parish for some time. The head altar server had to retire and the Parish Priest approached one of the other servers, Paul, to take his place. Seemingly unaware of John's disability Paul recommended John on the grounds that he was older.'

What was it that enabled Paul to see beyond John's disability? How can a parish be enabled to see a person's abilities rather than disabilities?

'Fr. Tom was clearly uncomfortable around people with learning disabilities. A new family in the parish invited him around to discuss the possibility of confirmation for Christine, their disabled teenaged daughter. The experience of Christine's warmth and joy during that visit was the first step in Fr. Tom's transformation.'

How do we see the whole person and not just the disability?

Challenges for the Parish

The challenge lies not only in serving needs but in enabling people with learning difficulties to contribute to the life and mission of the parish as full members of the body of Christ.

- Do we succeed in including people with learning difficulties? Are they invited to all our social events?
- How can we make the liturgical celebration of the parish accessible to everyone and sensitive to all needs?
- Do we make the sacramental preparation for people with learning difficulties relevant and easily accessible? What resources are available to help us with this responsibility?

- How many people with learning difficulties have a ministry, for example altar server or reader, in our parishes?
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Practical Actions

Once people find a way of communicating with each other in a loving way which respects the dignity and gifts of each and every individual, many of the issues are able to be resolved.

The priest who welcomes the new baby with learning disabilities in a chat with the family after Mass, signals the celebration to new life even, perhaps, in the midst of grieving, which enables other parishioners find the words to speak to the family.

‘Chris, father of Jimmy a brain-damaged boy, felt guilt and grief seeing no future for his son. The example of love and hope from the priest led the parish to take Jimmy to their hearts, helping Chris to accept and rejoice in his son.’

The parish might be able to find an advocate for people with learning difficulties; a parish council member for example. This person could raise awareness in the parish by speaking occasionally at a service or events.

The parish could develop a database of information for families to include signers; car drivers; visitors; audio tape production etc. Deanery sharing of information on the database could multiply the opportunities.

Consideration for carers might include a ‘phone in link to a live Mass each week for those unable to get to the church. Or even a video or computer link to Mass.

Prayer and Liturgical Opportunities

Made in the image and likeness of God, we believe that we are all sources of grace for each other. We welcome each other in love. ‘Welcome’ does not see disability: ‘welcome’ can bring a smile and feelings of belonging.

- Are all our Masses inclusive of people with learning difficulties? How often do we have special Masses?
- How do we include people with learning difficulties in our musical celebration? Do we know what special music resources are available?
- Do we consider the use of multi-sensory prayer sessions or take the chance to use all the senses during our liturgies?
- Do we know how we can amend the liturgy to suit people with learning difficulties?

Beatitudes for parishioners

Blessed are you when you smile at me

- for then I know I’m welcome

Blessed are you when you look at me with love

- for then I know I am special
 - Blessed are you when you wait for me
 - for then I know I belong
 - Blessed are you when you walk with me in public places
 - for then I know you are proud of me
 - Blessed are you when you ask me for help
 - for then I know I matter
 - Blessed are you when you are gentle with me
 - for then I am sure that I am loved
 - Blessed are you when you believe in me
 - for then I know that I am valued
 - Blessed are you when you hold my hand
 - how else can I feel God's compassion?
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Helpful Resources

www.throughtheroof.org Making the Christian message accessible
www.disabilitynow.org.uk Department for International Development
<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/about-us/vision-and-mission/our-business-plan/disability-equality/> Disability on the Equality and Human Rights Commission website
www.larche.org.uk L'Arche - building communities with people with learning difficulties
www.sensorytrust.org.uk The Sensory Trust
www.nas.org.uk National Autistic Society
<http://thekairosforum.com> For people with intellectual and cognitive disability
<http://www.stjoseph.org.uk> St Joseph's Pastoral Centre in Hendon
www.itsallnormal.com John McCorkell, Disability Awareness for All
www.cda-uk.com The Catholic Deaf Association
www.faithandlight.org.uk Faith and Light communities in the UK

Many dioceses have advisors on disability and learning difficulties. Check your local Catholic Directory for contact details.

Images of Perfection is a scheme of work for 11-14 year olds that uses the medium of art to get young people to reflect upon disability. It encourages pupils to see our equality in the eyes of God and builds upon the existing good work being done in the area of disability awareness within schools. This resource was distributed free to all secondary schools in 2008.

Valuing Difference is a report published by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales in 1998, now out of date but [available here as an archived](#) document.

[We Must Be Seen!](#) is an account of research in 2006 into the integration of people with learning disabilities into the life and work of the Archdiocese of Westminster. <http://www.spred.org.uk/news/0307.pdf>

This leaflet is one of a series devised to assist parishes to become more welcoming, friendly and family-sensitive.

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