

by John Naudé

# resource sheet 5

## able and willing

Reflections on issues surrounding ministry  
and disability

**H**aving a disability has never really been a problem to me. There are times when I get frustrated – usually at the way people respond to the fact that I use a wheelchair, making enormous assumptions about what I can and cannot do.

I was born with my disability and it is part of me – just as being male is part of me. My disability is not the only thing that makes me into the person I am, yet some people seem to think that it is the ‘be all and end all’ of who I am. It isn’t. It is just one more aspect of being me that has shaped me into the person I have become today. God in his grace has used me, not in spite my disability, but through it.

Likewise, I have never felt the need not to be disabled. Indeed there are some advantages to having a disability: free parking, avoiding the queues for rides at Alton Towers – to name two!

Shortly after becoming a Christian I saw a television programme looking at the Church’s attitude to disabled people within ministry. It concluded that the Church was not very good at including disabled people. Indeed it seemed actively to discourage disabled people from exercising any kind of formal ministry.

At the end of the programme I was in tears, although I could not understand why. I asked God: ‘Why am I crying?’ I sensed God saying: ‘Because that is where I want you to be!’ My immediate response was: ‘Didn’t you see the programme – there’s no way I could ever be accepted!’

I decided to pursue (with great scepticism) what God had suggested. I think I was waiting for someone to say: ‘John, have you really thought about this? You are disabled. How are you going to manage?’ Then I could simply say to God: ‘You see, I tried.’ And I could then ignore any sense of calling.

God had other ideas! The first person with whom I spoke about my calling was very positive. When I approached my vicar, I didn’t get a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ response. What I got was great wisdom. He simply said, ‘If God is calling you into the ministry, then it’s the best job in the world. If he isn’t, then it’s the worst.’

This was all going too easily. So I decided to run away from the idea. Over the next eight years I often felt God’s nudge reminding me. Then the curate of my church mentioned that he was starting an ‘exploration course for those who felt God may be calling them into some form of ministry’. I was very happy in my job, but felt this was something I should attend.

Eventually, I met the diocesan director of ordinands. He wisely said that if God was calling me to the ordained ministry, then it was the role of the diocese to ensure that I could fulfil that ministry. What an amazing attitude! First, seeking God’s purpose, and then wanting to enable it to

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happen. Sadly, I have come across many disabled people who have not had such a response.

My DDO encouraged me to read *The Stature of Waiting*, by W H Vanstone (DLT). It explored Jesus' passion

– and how he relinquished control. He chose to

be passive, allowing himself simply to be, while events happened around him – and to him.

The author argues that in this time

Jesus is at his most powerful, when he

chose not to do, but to be. It helped me enormously

by letting me see that God was calling me as me, not because of what I do, but for who I am.

If God is calling anyone to exercise the gifts that he has given them, then we as a Church should not put up barriers. This applies equally to disabled and non-disabled people. But sadly it happens quite often to disabled people.

The problem with assumptions is that they are usually wrong. Often questions arise which focus on 'How will this or that be done?'

The reality is that the challenges of daily life can make disabled people remarkably resourceful. Sometimes, if we need to do A and B, it may mean going via C. There are many creative ways of doing things. Most of the time it is a matter of asking questions and looking at situations creatively. For example, I might be asked to celebrate Communion where the altar is up a flight of steps. Given some communication and discussion, most churchwardens and congregations will be open to trying something different.

When dealing with someone who has a disability, one of the important

questions to ask yourself and the person concerned is, 'What does this disability *bring* to ministry?' It is often assumed that disabled people will always be ministered to. God is so much more gracious than we ever give him credit for. Many of us may think, 'why did you choose me, when there are so many more able?' Yet God, just as he called Moses, chooses us, not despite our weaknesses but because of them. If we are reliant on him, then surely that is the better way to be. Paul has said that God is glorified in our weakness. Disabled people are often the weakest and most outcast within our society. We should be seeking to use the gifts God has given everyone for the glory of his Church.

1 Corinthians 12:12 onwards speaks powerfully of valuing the whole body of Christ. But it is more than just valuing. First, the body is made of many parts, 'and though all its parts are many, they form one body.' Disabled people come as disabled people into the body of Christ. They are not a broken arm or leg that the body drags along. No, they play their part in the body, as disabled people.

'For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free, (disabled or not) – and we were all given the Spirit to drink.' In God's eyes there is a wonderful equality in the way he looks at us. Through Christ, we are united to the Father, the same Christ died for all, and saves all who turn to him.

In verses 14 to 17 we see the need to ensure that we all take our place in the body, as we are, not trying to be something else. We cannot say that because we are 'only' an ear or eye, we are of no significance to the body. It is God who has arranged the body and its parts; we are to play our part in whatever function God gives us.

Verse 21 goes on to explore how we cannot say that we don't need a part

of the body. This is what has been happening to many disabled people. They have been left with the feeling that they are not needed, they are to be recipients of ministry, not deliverers of it. Paul says in verse 22 'On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker, are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment.' Read this through the eyes of a disabled person, and hear what it says about being honoured and valued. This should help us to look within the Church for those people whom God wishes to use, who are currently being excluded or ignored because of their disability or social class.

Verse 24 goes on to say: 'But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, that its parts should have equal concern for each other.' There should be no division within the body, and its parts should have equal concern for each other. Jesus is the head, We look to him for our guidance and leadership, and therefore whatever part of the body we are, we use fully the abilities we have been given.

Finally it says: 'If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.' If we are seeing the Church as the body of Christ, then in valuing and seeking every-member ministry, we also realise that when one part of the body suffers, it affects the whole body. In other words, if we are excluding the gifts that disabled people have to bring to God's Church, then sadly the body suffers because it cannot function fully. It suffers, because one part of it is not being exercised or

valued for the part it has to play in enabling the body of Christ to operate fully.

God's Church is full of people who are gifted. Disabled people are not often in our churches because of people's attitudes and assumptions and the way the Church responds to them. Disabled people represent 14.2% of the population. Does your church have anywhere near that proportion of disabled people within it? There is an enormous mission field out there. Disabled people need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ just as much as anyone else does. There are the physical barriers that can communicate that disabled people are not wanted in the Church. There are more importantly the attitudinal barriers the disabled person encounters upon entering a church. If we are to reach out to the whole of our community, then we need to also reach out to disabled people. However, once part of the Church, we should be actively looking for the gifts God has given them, to use for his glory, within his Church – a message which applies to all people.

To sum up: God calls people to ordained ministry from different backgrounds and with different abilities. Having a disability is not a barrier to ordained ministry – the question always has to be: is God calling me? If he is, then he will equip and enable.

### **Some starting points**

The following tips apply equally to those who are disabled considering a call to ministry, and to those supporting and helping them. Remember, each person and situation is unique so communication is crucial at every step of the way.

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## Key issues about disability and ministry

- Remember you are a part of the body of Christ; you have a part to play in it.
- Ask the question: What does having a disability bring to ministry?
- Don't be afraid to ask or offer help. There are many individuals or organisations who have the experience and ability to help.
- Don't deny that there may be obstacles presented before you – be prepared to face them.
- Remember – if God has called you, God will provide. Always seek his purpose and plans for the life he has called you to.

## Useful organisations and resources

Information about Disability Sunday, and other resources can be obtained from Through the Roof (TTR). TTR aims to make the Christian message accessible to those facing disability as well as helping disabled people towards leadership and ministry in the Church. Their contact details are:

PO Box 353  
EPSOM  
Surrey  
KT18 5WS

T 01372 749955  
F 01372 737040  
Minicom: 01372 737041  
E [info@throughtheroof.org](mailto:info@throughtheroof.org)  
W [www.throughtheroof.org/dms.htm](http://www.throughtheroof.org/dms.htm)

Ministry Division can provide detailed information for candidates and their supporters, and in particular channels its approach through: Committee for Ministry of and among Deaf and Disabled People (CMDDP)

Through the CMDDP the Church of England seeks to support and encourage the ministries of deaf and disabled people and also the ministries of all those who work with them. This involves encouraging and strengthening the participation and representation of deaf and disabled people at every level in the life and witness of the Church.

The CMDDP provides training, advice and support for those involved in ministry with deaf and disabled people and seeks to ensure that the gifts and

ministries of all deaf and disabled are fully used and valued in the Church, including representation at every level within synods and councils. Particularly important at the present time is the work of helping the Church to comply with the provisions of the Discrimination Act, which came into force fully in 2004.

Ministry Division can be contacted at:

Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council  
Church House,  
Great Smith Street  
LONDON  
SW1P 3NZ

or through the Church of England website: [www.cofe.anglican.org](http://www.cofe.anglican.org)

On this website notes can be accessed from the DDO Handbook, Section 3, on the approach to candidates with disabilities, including epilepsy, blind or deaf candidates, and dyslexia and related learning difficulties; Guidelines for the sponsorship and care of candidates with a disability, and Appendix 3, Sponsorship of Candidates with a Disability.

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## resource sheets

Download sheets free of charge from [www.cpas.org.uk/vocationresources](http://www.cpas.org.uk/vocationresources) or buy a complete set of printed sheets at [www.cpas.org.uk/shop](http://www.cpas.org.uk/shop). For bulk copies of individual sheets, phone 01926 458461 or email [mnorris@cpas.org.uk](mailto:mnorris@cpas.org.uk).

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|---------------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| 1 Guidance                            | 7 On being not recommended for training        | 13 Infant baptism            |
| 2 What kind of people?                | 8 Non-stipendiary ministry/OLM                 | 14 Theological training      |
| 3 Women and ministry                  | 9 Ministers in secular employment              | 15 Pre-training reading      |
| 4 Calling for all?                    | 10 Church Army: pioneering evangelists         | 16 Grants for training       |
| 5 Able and willing                    | 11 Readers in the Church of England            | 17 Fostering vocation        |
| 6 What do Bishops' Advisers look for? | 12 Church of England: obstacle or opportunity? | 18 Situations vacant         |
|                                       |  | 19 Ordained pioneer ministry |

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