

# The full belonging and active inclusion of children with disabilities and their families, in Messy Church groups and activities

Provided by Cristina Gangemi, Author ©October 2010

## Theological reflection on discipleship, Messy Church and disability

'You are the heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with our ancestors. He said to Abraham, "*Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.*" When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you' (Acts 3:25-26, NIV, emphasis ours).

I wonder if, when we awake each morning, we identify ourselves with the prophets and ancestors of the church. As heirs of God's promise, we are each called to hand down our precious inheritance of God's blessing to 'all the families of the earth'. God's promise was not reserved for a chosen few but was an outpouring of blessing to *all* families of the earth. However, a common experience of families who have a child with a disability is often one that includes being isolated or indeed forgotten. Parents of disabled children who have shared their experience of 'belonging' to a church community often speak of being segregated and of situations where, due to lack of awareness and know-how, their child's needs are not always fully met. If we return to our passage from scripture we can see that *as prophets*, within our own time and culture, we must be the offspring in the church who ensure that the blessing of God's servant is truly shared and poured out on everyone, no matter their ability.

In her blog of 17 Sep 2010, Lucy challenged us to 'Think imaginatively and honestly about what would help Messy Church congregations to grow in Christ / walk the journey with him / live Christian lives' (<http://www.messychurch.org.uk/pages/5510.htm>).

The full and active *belonging* of children with disabilities and their families in our Messy Church groups and activities ensures that all people are given the equal opportunity to 'grow together in their walk of faith', (<http://www.messychurch.org.uk/3529>) live out God's covenant, and be a community of disciples where *all* are blessed and *all* are welcome.

Each person, irrespective of physical or learning abilities, is awesomely and wondrously knitted together in the mother's womb (Psalm 139). As such, we each have the creative capacity to reflect God and share the image of God with others. As a community of believers, we reflect the fullness of God's love and we present the wholeness of the body of Christ in the world. Where people with disabilities are not present in our communities and gatherings, the body of Christ is left incomplete and our experience of presenting Christ to the world remains impoverished. Many people who have shared faith with people with a disability speak of a mutual experience of the fullness and creativeness of God's love for us all.

We hope that these guidelines will help Messy Church leaders actively to seek out the families that are called to be blessed through Messy Church and also encourage families actively to seek out and participate fully in the joyful experience of Messy Church communities. The welcome and inclusive activities suggested in these guidelines will be beneficial for the ministries and participation of all who gather to be church. As we live out our call to discipleship and prophecy, we hope that the presence and contribution of people with disabilities and their families will help all involved to grow in Christ, walk the journey with him, and truly live out what it means to be his disciple.

We hope you enjoy the following guidelines and that they facilitate a true sense of belonging for disabled people within your groups.

### **Guidelines for group leaders and Messy Church organisations**

#### **Outreach**

One of the most important outcomes from Messy Church gatherings, as mentioned in the video on the Messy Church website, is that of 'the friendships that develop'. This is especially important for families who have a disabled member.

Due to the fact that children with disabilities often attend schools that are adapted to meet their educational needs and not always the local mainstream schools, their families may not have access to news about Messy Church gatherings or indeed know that they exist at all. It is also true that many families tend *not* to attend local churches due to the feeling of not being fully welcome in formal environments and activities. The community focus of Messy Church provides an invaluable opportunity for children with special needs and their families to make a contribution to and discover a place where they feel that they belong. Messy Church and its focus on reaching out into the margins provides a unique opportunity for families to become more confident in feeling welcomed and belonging to a community. This in turn may lead them not to feel so excluded from church and encourage them to become more involved with the local Christian community.

The time is ripe, the time is *now*. We are the generation called to make changes and to draw all people to the welcome and love of God.

The following guidelines seek to assist you in your outreach to people who have a disability and their families.

#### **To find and welcome people with disabilities it may help to...**

1. ... pray alone.
2. ... pray together as group leaders.
3. ... think imaginatively about your local area and listen to people who don't go to church.
4. ... explore your local area and determine if there are any special educational schools or disability/parent support groups.

5. ... gather as group leaders and create a pamphlet that explains visually all that Messy Church has to offer. It would be a good for your group to purchase the 'graphics' program that is used within special education. This is named 'Widgit Communicate in Print'. This is a well-known and highly specialised graphics programme, used within the educating and communication skills of children with learning disabilities. The resource is a simple computer programme that will enable you to produce symbol-supported text resources for children who have differing ways of communicating and engaging in cognitive activities. To read more about this resource please visit <http://www.widgit.com/products/inprint/index.htm>.
6. ... explore the Messy Church resources on the website and identify the services that you all feel would be important for families and children with a disability.

You could create a pamphlet about Messy Church. This should include the following information:

- Words of Welcome
- Importance of belonging for all within Messy Church gatherings
- Offer of opportunity to make meaningful friendships
- A taste of the accessible and creative activities on offer
- Commitment to adapt and differentiate so as to meet specific needs
- Space for parents to express particular needs. This will show you are inclusive and ready to adapt.

This could look like this:

Please advise if you need

BSL  Loop  Makaton  Symbols  Wheelchair access

Other \_\_\_\_\_

You will need to find someone who can provide the above services so that you can respond to needs that will arise.

It would be a good idea to plan a Makaton sign language training for your team. Makaton uses signs and symbols to teach communication, language and literacy skills to people with communication and learning difficulties:

<http://www.makaton.org> or contact Mike Harris  
[signandsymbol@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:signandsymbol@blueyonder.co.uk)

It would be a good idea to use some widgit symbols so as to show families that you are familiar with current resources for people with disabilities. You will need to contact widgit and discuss what would be possible:  
<http://www.widgit.com>.

Visit the local special school and ask if you could circulate your pamphlets amongst staff and parents. Explore other venues where you could place the welcome pamphlets in your local area.

Invite parents from the local area to a coffee morning and show them the Messy Church PowerPoint. You will have to add the services available to children with disabilities to the PowerPoint presentation.

Chat with other families who attend Messy Church and ask them actively to seek out families who have members with a disability. Give them some pamphlets to hand out and ask them to invite people they may be aware of those who may be interested.

Prepare a questionnaire for parents that will enable them to ask questions about your particular Messy Church and also advise group leaders of the specific needs of their child.

The questionnaire should include the following requests:

- What are the physical abilities and limitations of the child or of the parents (depending on who it is who has the disability)
- What the child enjoys and likes to do
- What they don't like or are unable to do
- What are the behaviour patterns of the child
- What encourages positive behaviour and what could trigger challenges
- What hopes do you have as you think about joining a Messy Church activity?
- What would you like the group leaders to do so as to make the experience as good as possible?

Once parents have stated a desire to join in with church activities and sessions, assign a family to meet them for the first session and accompany them. It is important that the family does not feel left out or that they do not have to sit on a special table. This initial welcome is vital and the new family must be made to feel that they 'would be welcomed by everyone attending; would be able to take part in all the activities and experience the love of God through the teaching and care and they receive at Messy Church' (a Messy Church group leader, 2010).

Use the expertise and support of the parents of children with disabilities or indeed parents who have a disability themselves. Invite them to participate in the following:

- a) activities
- b) leadership roles
- c) planning and sharing worship
- d) parent interaction

It is important, however, that parental expertise should form part of the general contribution and belonging to Messy Church groups. Those parents of children with a disability should not be left entirely to oversee disability and access. All members, from the church leaders and ministers to members of the congregation, should have an understanding of the positive contribution that disabled people bring.

Parents of disabled children should not feel that 'special needs ministry is likely to be something that a ministry team would look to them to promote' (Messy Church parent of special needs child, 2010). Access, differentiation and belonging should be the focus and responsibility of the whole team.

Please ensure that parents of disabled children do not feel isolated within groups. They should have frequent catch-up meetings to ensure that all needs are being met and that they feel part of the whole community.

### **Guidelines for parents who wish to join Messy Church with their children**

1. You and your children are very welcome to come and join in with Messy Church gatherings and church activities.
2. We are extremely committed to ensuring that you have a sense of belonging and that the particular needs of your child and family are met to the best of our ability.
3. To be able to meet these needs, we will ask you to complete a questionnaire that will help you ask questions about Messy Church and also advise us of the needs your child may have.
4. If you hear about a Messy Church group in your area, or if you respond to one of the Messy Church invitation pamphlets, please make a date to meet with the group leaders. They may be able to give you a questionnaire and share information with you about Messy Church.
5. If you have a disability and would like to join the leadership team or volunteer to support activities, please advise the Messy Church team of how they can best meet your needs.

### **Guidelines for leaders and volunteers who are involved in providing a Messy Church session**

The following guidelines will help you as you plan Messy Church sessions that will include children who have a disability.

‘Even children with very severe and complex disabilities have great potential for learning; how far this is realised is dependent on the quality of the interactions they experience’ (Liz O’Brien, *Connecting with RE*, p.4). ‘When the liturgies or acts of worship reflect the vision, events and developments, challenges and disappointments, joys and sadness experienced in the life (...) they provide the rhythm through which the heartbeat of the community is felt and are a source of strength’ (Liz O’Brien, *Connecting with RE*, p.109) for those who wish to attend and their families.

To ensure that sessions are truly inclusive, team leaders need to be familiar with the needs of those who attend. Often people with disabilities experience a different way of processing information and engaging in learning and in spiritual and physical activities. Messy Church embraces difference and seeks to ensure that any difficulty can be turned into an opportunity for experiencing God, following Jesus and belonging to church. It is hoped that the following guidelines will help you plan and celebrate together.

## **Understanding and embracing difference**

### **When a child with disabilities joins your group**

1. A true relationship understands beyond words or sounds, communicates beyond definitions, and frees persons to be at their best. An individual’s participation in a large group may be affected by
  - short concentration span
  - group size
  - noise levels
  - pace and other environmental or social factors

Therefore, you will need to assess the individual’s abilities and decide which factors may be positive or challenging for a child or parent.

2. Identify a volunteer who may be able to support and accompany the child during sessions. It is not advisable always to choose the child’s parent to do this. If possible, recruit a person that has some experience with children who have disabilities.
3. Introduce the child to the support volunteer and let them get to know each other. It will be important to establish a relationship before the child starts sessions. It is also a good idea to invite two children also to

befriend the child who wishes to attend. The same need to establish relationship will apply.

4. If a child with a learning disability wishes to join your group, it is a good idea to invite them to visit the venue you use for sessions. This should be done when the venue is empty as it will allow the child to become familiar with the environment. Allow the child to use their senses to touch and experience the venue.
5. Give the child a photograph of the venue and accompany it with a smiling face and the word or a symbol for 'welcome'. Invite the child to take the photo home.
6. Invite the parent and child to bring the photo with them each time they come. Parents can use this photo as a cue to let the child know each time they are to attend a session of Messy Church.
7. Show the child where they will sit and let them sit down and become familiar with the process of coming into the room and sitting at their table.

### **Setting up of venue and welcoming children**

1. For a child with a learning disability structure and routine is vital. Photographs of each venue that you work in will help the child know where they will be going. This will remove anxiety that sometimes comes with change. The photographs should be mounted on to a white piece of card and the word or a symbol for 'NOW' should be written above the photo. This is not for the child to read but for their support volunteer to say to them each time they change activity. When you plan for their inclusion and belonging, look out for the following:
  - Ensure that your venue is set up and ready before you welcome the children.
  - Always start your session in the same place and use visual aids to support the verbal theme of the session. Give the child one place to stand or sit and let them always go to that place unless they choose otherwise.
  - When it is time to move, give the child with a disability a photo of the place they will be moving to and invite them to go there. It could be that they lead all the children into the next venue so that they are not fazed by a room full of information and noise.

- Invite the child to sit at their table, which should be ready for them to work on. Have a list of pictures or symbols on the table that helps them to know what they will be doing.
- When it is time to change activity, gently give them a photo of the next venue/activity that they will be moving to next.
- If you have a child in a wheelchair, plan your room so that each table has an empty space for the wheelchair to slip into. This will avoid having to move chairs around as they arrive at the table and will ensure that they are not highlighted within the group.

### **Structure of sessions:**

Structure is very important and a well-structured session will enable the child with a learning disability to become familiar with the rhythm of your session and this in turn will help them feel comfortable and secure.

The following structure may assist you in planning your weekly session:

\*MEET ©Gangemi 2006 (This process has been amended for use by Messy Church and adapted to Messy Church activities).

### **MEET PROCESS AS A SESSION PLAN ©C Gangemi 2006**

#### **MEET PROCESS © c. Gangemi 2006**

**M**Meet the person and initiate the session in a way that attends to their cognitive processing skills, physical needs and communication skills.

**E**xplain the message in a differentiated format, using mediating skills and resources.

**E**xplore the theme/message/learning aim in a differentiated and mediated format, according to skills, potential, age communication and processing ability of participant/student.

**T**ranscend beyond what the participant/student knows or knew before session or activity.

**Therefore a session may look like this**

**Meet:** Gather the participants and welcome them, Play some soft music, which enables them and the whole group of children to know that the session is beginning. You may choose to start your session with a short prayer activity. **Hand child the photo card to show that the activity/venue is changing.**

**Explain:** Explain the theme of your session (*use differentiated resources, language and process patterns: using visual cues, symbols, a short drama or a simple song*). Give the child with a disability a photo card that is connected to your theme and that helps them make links to what you are sharing. **Hand the photo card to the child to show that the activity/venue is changing.**

**Explore:** Explore theme through differentiated activities: move to the new venue and invite child to sit in their personal place. Engage participants in differentiated activity and mediate questions using lotto cards that have been made in

- symbols or photographs
- matching games
- movement and placement of pictures on a story board, a plain piece of paper or card, story bags<sup>®</sup> or use of symbols ( see guidelines for using symbols and making story bags<sup>®</sup> below)
- making a jigsaw of picture.
- painting
- creative art

Ask participants to explore their thoughts, opinions and answer questions. Use these differentiated formats and resources to mediate learning and obtain answers. Encourage participants to express themselves by pointing to photos or using the activities mentioned in this section. **Hand the photo card to the child to show that the activity is changing.**

**Transcend:** Enable child to go beyond what they already know.

Celebration time: Re-gather the whole group and move to your celebration venue. During the celebration, invite the child to sit at the front of the group so that all movement and visual information is behind them. Invite child to bring what they have been doing and share it with whole group. In this way you will build the self-esteem of the child and enable all other children to recognise the child's skills and achievement. During the celebration, use songs and prayers with simple words. Use visual cues to enhance the consolidation of your theme. Encourage the child to hold one of the new activities they have engaged in so that they can take ownership of their new knowledge and experience.

*\*permission given for use of mediating process by Messy Church leaders, permission must be sought for any other use of this process in mediating learning and faith based activities: [casagangemi@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:casagangemi@blueyonder.co.uk)*

### **Building skills in symbolic activities** **Some tips on using symbols and on discerning needs**

1. Each person with learning difficulties is an individual and their needs will be as individual as they are themselves. It is important to get to know the child or parent who has a disability and to try to discern exactly what his/her needs and understanding will be.
2. It will be important to watch and begin to understand the way in which the person with whom you wish to communicate actually communicates himself or herself.
3. Once this is established, there are some basic questions you will need to ask the parent of the child or indeed discover for yourself. You could use the following as a check list for planning for inclusion and belonging.
  - **Choice**
    - Can he/she choose
    - How does he/she choose? Could symbols or visual objects aid this process?
  - **Assertiveness**
    - Can he/she initiate, question, disagree, control activities?
    - Could symbols/objects aid this by providing a symbolic / visual reference to assist learning and understanding / experience?
  - **Questions**
    - Can he / she ask questions?
    - In what form?
    - Could symbols help in forming structures for questions to be asked and answered?
    - Will symbols help to prompt and assist memory and attention?
  - **Friendship/social skills**
    - What language skills does the child/adult have?
    - How do they communicate with their peers?
    - How does he/she interact and do they need help with this skill?
    - Could symbols or photographs promote interaction, language skills, or social skills

- Can he/she have an intimate conversation with a friend or family member?
- **Independence and learning skills**
  - What are his/her independence skills?
  - Does the person need sensory aids to be independent?
  - Could you or others be his/her hands, ears, and eyes?
  - How could this be achieved while maintaining the dignity and independence of the individual?
  - Can he/she see what you are doing?
  - Does he/she need to be nearer the person talking or the focus point at prayer time?
  - Does he/she use a wheelchair and is there sufficient space for the person to move freely?
  - Does the person in a wheelchair need someone to push them?
  - Is the position of the wheelchair correct if they are to follow the group meetings alongside their peers?
  - Does he/she have impaired hearing?
  - Do he/she need to be close to whoever is speaking?
  - Does the person respond to touch or does touch or immediate personal contact prove to be challenging for them?
  - How could this be overcome if he/she is to respond? Could blowing from afar, gentle music or comforting instrumental music (gentle bells) build up confidence and relationship? Once relationship and trust is established, what will be a good way forward for you and the child or parent?

**Always focus on what can be done, not on what cannot be done.**

- **People who are deaf/poor hearing**
  - Is there a working loop system in the venue?
  - The person will need to have a clear view of what is happening.
  - If someone is signing, again a clear view will be needed.
  - If there is no signing available, ensure that the person who is deaf has access to written explanations of what is being said.
  - Is there anyone who can sign BSL or Makaton? Could you recruit someone who can help with this?

It is not always possible to have people who can sign for them. It is important, therefore, that we are aware of possible feelings of exclusion. As group leaders, choose to make a real effort to ensure that access is provided in some form to the same events as the whole Messy Church community. It is vital that they feel involved in this process and that they are not made to feel inferior or that something is being 'done' for them.

- It will be important that they have the opportunity to explain their needs and assist in the process of their needs being met. All people are working together for the community.
- Ask child or parent how they would like to be involved; this will show that all they have to offer is valued in our communities.

Sign language is a beautiful experience. Sometimes, we can see through the movements of hands more than words can relate. As we begin to communicate, our world is enriched and the walls of silence are broken down. We become members of communities, who show that we want to share in the richness of all God's people, be it through the word of mouth or the movements of hands.

### **Using symbols and making links to themes and concepts.**

By symbols we mean images, wiggit or Makaton symbol supported text (see above), or actual objects that represent concepts or realities.

Symbols are very effective when you wish to enhance understanding and cognitive processing. The symbol assists the reasoning process of a child with a learning disability and helps them to have a tangible or visual connection to the audio word. You can use real objects or graphics to help understanding.

Visual objects are always very useful for working with people of all abilities. Vibrant colours, candles, familiar objects, repetitive music that is not too challenging, materials of differing textures and colour, are all useful when planning a prayer focus or learning activity.

The idea is that you use your ability to reason and make links. Once you have done this then you can share that skill with the child.

### **Tips for using symbols**

- Associate symbols with a sign, gesture or a written word
- Match symbol or picture to (for example, the church symbol) to an actual photograph or action (for example, a visit to the church)
- Match symbol to a real life object
- Match symbol to spoken word
- You can use sorting/matching games to enhance/consolidate understanding. This could be in the form of lotto games where you invite the child to place a matching picture on a lotto board you may have made. The lotto board should be made up of pictures that represent the theme you are trying to mediate.
- Link symbols with short simple sentences / phrases.
- Look for ways in which he/she can respond by pointing, signing, or using pointing sticks.
- Always look for the way in which you can recognise a yes/no answer and always acknowledge any movements.
- Try to answer, no matter how slight the movement may have been.

- Any movement, eye contact, acknowledgement is a sign that the person is communicating/wishes to communicate with you.
- Use story bags® to help children have a tangible experience of scripture or stories you may share.



## **Make a Story in a Bag**

For ideas in making story bags®, please see:

[http://www.education.com/activity/article/puppets\\_first/](http://www.education.com/activity/article/puppets_first/)

If possible use sign language and then add the symbol to the sign. Personal communication is really important if the person with disabilities is to feel a valued member of the group.

If a person feels that they are being listened to, they will feel accepted and will want to contribute more. Acknowledgement, positive attitude and acceptance are ways of showing that people with a disability are equal members of any community.

It is important never to assume that the person with whom you are sharing faith has no understanding. Always speak directly to the person with a disability. You will be making decisions that involve them and their own spirituality. People with disabilities are valuable people with a vital and valuable contribution to make to your group.

Watch and listen to all that a person with a disability tries to communicate to you. Be creative in inventing new ways to differentiate the sessions you plan and ensure that it is part of the same programme the whole group follows.

It is very important that the people with disabilities do not perceive themselves to be different from the whole community surrounding them.

It is also vital to remember that faith journeys made by persons with disabilities are as important, valuable and personal as those made by each member of the faithful community around them. Journey and share together, experience new and meaningful ways in which God's love is given to all his people no matter their ability.

## **Managing behaviour**

Children with disabilities can sometime manifest challenging behaviour. This is not usually something they choose to do but can often mean that they are feeling frustrated or confused. Generally, using structure, routine and symbolic activities ensures that themes and sessions become more accessible and less challenging for the processing skills of children with learning disabilities. This usually results in the child staying calm and involved. However, in the event of the child not being able to cope, here are some guidelines for managing their behaviour in a positive way:

- Help the children to know that they are in a special place and that they are welcome.
- Hold high expectations of behaviour and always stay calm.
- Use praise wherever possible; positive affirmation brings forth positive behaviour.
- Make a 'quiet please' badge or a poster that tells any of the children that you want them to be calm. This can be used for the child with a disability to help them remember what you want them to do. When you want to remind them just point to the badge you have pinned on you or to the poster. This must be done very diplomatically so as not to highlight the child amongst the others.
- Touch can be difficult for children with autism, so hold your hand out for them to touch if they wish to. This will help you know if touch is challenging or not.
- Stay calm but be firm. Do not raise your voice as this may cause anxiety. Just change the tone and rhythm of your words.
- If being included in a large group is not working and the child is becoming too agitated or showing signs of over-processing, you can use a quiet prayer corner to help them have 'time out'.
- Moving to the prayer corner will enable them to calm down and become destimulated. The prayer corner should not be seen as a naughty corner but a place in the room that anyone can go to if they wish.

A focal point and prayer corner captures imagination; here are some ideas for making one.

## **Prayer focal points and visual aids**

### **Creating a focal point**

Visual objects are always very useful for working with people of all abilities.

The following materials and resources will help you in the creation of a focal point for spiritual reflection and for use in dealing with over-processing of information.

### **Resources**

- Vibrant coloured materials
- Different textured material or coloured tissue paper.
- Scented candles
- Electric fairy lights

The feeling of warmth and softness can often help with participants who do not have full vision. Place some velvet or silk that has been warmed on a radiator in their hands if they are not able to see the focal point clearly.

### **Creating the focal point:**

- You should use the floor or a table according to the physical ability of your participants.
- Choose two or three coloured pieces of material or tissue paper.
- Create three different levels of height by using boxes of different sizes. Drape the material or tissue paper over the boxes.
- Place lights around the focal area.
- Light the scented candles. Include these only when you have enough volunteers to monitor health and safety.
- Place the electric fairy lights on the focal point as desired (please be careful of wires).  
The idea is to create a sense of awe and wonder as well as giving a calm and pleasant environment for reflecting and consolidating all the information of the past five sessions.

### **People who are blind or have poor vision.**

- When you first meet a blind person, introduce yourself. When you are going to move away, tell them. Don't leave them talking to an empty space.
- When you are sharing an activity, ensure that you explain what is going on. If you wish everyone to sit down, gently lean over, touch their arm and advise them. Don't leave them to be the only one standing.
- Respect each person for who they are. Their blindness is a part of them. Be sensitive to their blindness and avoid using language that excludes them because of their blindness.
- When sharing liturgies, use smell, music and tactile materials to enhance and enrich God's word and create the sense of awe. If the theme or words are centred around sight and vision, try to share and recreate the images through using these tactile resources.

- If you produce a worksheet in a written format, print some in font Arial size 18. The best colour for people who need large print is black ink on dull yellow paper. Always have large print copies available so you can hand them out if needed. This gives an affirmation of the inclusive awareness of the parish.
- Contact the Mag Ray services for assistance and expertise, They can organise the translation of any document into Braille, through the receipt of a simple email: [ray@magray.co.uk](mailto:ray@magray.co.uk) or contact the Torch Trust <http://www.torchtrust.org/>.
- If a blind person comes into the group, be it a parent or a person requesting to be part of a group, the facility of documentation in Braille will be sign of welcome and inclusion.
- Develop a group who will record newsletters, gospel readings, and important parish information on to tape.
- In any document you produce or activity you participate in always remember to ask if anyone has any specific need: to know in advance avoids rushing, embarrassment and promotes a sense of inclusion and value.

Language :

**Do Not Say**

The disabled

**Use**

Disabled people/people with a disability

Suffering from/crippled by

Afflicted by/a victim of

A person who has/ a person with

Deaf and Dumb

Deaf without speech

An epileptic

A person with epilepsy

Spastic

A person with cerebral palsy

Mentally handicapped

A person with a learning disability

Confined to a wheelchair

Wheelchair user

### Physical / Sensory Access:

- The most effective and appropriate was to ensure 'access' is to **consult and seek the advice people who have disabilities**. Ask them what they need to ensure that all activities and locations are accessible.
- To ensure that all activities are accessible you will need to :  
Look at the space available in any of the locations that are frequented for events. Some wheelchairs are large, some small. Ask yourself if there is enough room for someone to manoeuvre a wheelchair.
- Seek the advice of the local council's 'Access Officer'. They will be able to assess the changes which may need to be made to the parish locations. Apply to the Equality and Human Rights Commission <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/about-us/the-commissioners/disability-committee/> and ask for a copy of the Disability and Equality Act and various documents which they produce. These have a wealth of information and will keep you aware of necessary changes that became Law in 2010.
- Gain personal experience. Ask to borrow a wheelchair and try to enter the location yourself. You will soon discover the needs of a person in a wheelchair.
- Don't forget the person who is pushing the wheelchair. Difficult angles and steep ramps call for extra strain on backs and muscles.
- If a person has weak motor skills and does not walk steadily, try to remove any obstacles which would result in tripping over and causing some embarrassment and pain. If the space in which they are to walk is wide and there is nothing to hold on to, ask if they would like something to steady them and await their reply. If they say 'no', respect this. They know their balance and coordination skills better than anyone.
- Try to provide comfortable seats which are neither too low nor too high. Seats with arms give security and a steady arm to hold on to. Some people like to sit at a table as they feel secure and it helps focus concentration.
- If a person with a physical disability wishes to participate in ministry, consult with them. Adjustments could be made to meet their needs and ensure that they are able to share in their chosen ministry.

Hold high positive expectations but at the same time be realistic in discussing possible ministries. Achievable ministry will assist in spiritual growth. Anything not achievable will give a sense of failure.

There is no 'ONE WAY' of including disabled people in your groups. There are lots of methods... what is most important is that the person with a disability and their families are welcome.

***As Christian communities we must seek the possibilities before the barriers and bring all people to Christ and Christ to all people. We do hope you will enjoy sharing your faith and creativity with all the people God sends to your groups...***