

Access Policy
St Nics, Nottingham
January 2022.

The purpose of this policy is to set out the goals and aspirations of St Nics in terms of its understanding of access for people with disabilities¹. The policy stresses the fact that access is not restricted to physical space but to concepts, language and the provision of opportunity for every person to minister or use their gifts, despite their activity limitations or participation restrictions. Indeed, an access policy from a Christian perspective, is not building centred, but person-centred. The policy places this in a theological context and outlines its objectives as to how it intends to become 'a church for all', exemplifying best practice as an outworking of the Christian gospel.

1. Theological Introduction

One of the problems disabled people have is that they are defined by a negative. They are *dis-abled*. This is different to other minority groups in the areas of ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. One of the initial issues then, is how to remove negative perceptions of disabled people. Over hundreds of years disabled people have often been seen as sub-human and have been removed from the community for no good reason except that they are not seen as 'normal'. But the Christian gospel views the world differently. *No longer, then, do we judge anyone by human standards. Even if at one time we judged Christ according to human standards, we no longer do so.*² The Christian community does not look at people through the lens of social conventions of what is normal or acceptable but through the eyes of Christ.

One in five of people in Britain is disabled but two thirds of its population say they feel awkward around disabled people, and many say they avoid them completely. Scope conducted a survey which led to its 'End the Awkward' campaign which was a creative and telling treatment of the way we perceive disabled people. It used some humorous but very pointed videos in doing so. It also led to other work on closing the perception gap. All this can be found [here](#). Is the Church any different?

So, disability is not just a matter of the body; it is also social and environmental. People are disabled, (a verb) by the context in which they live. Church can be enabling or disabling. A person in a wheelchair is not disabled if access is provided for them via a ramp but they are if they are faced with stairs. We can also disable people by our assumptions about them or our treatment of them. To what extent are we enabling or disabling?

¹ Disability language is highly political and often contentious. The difference between referring to people as 'disabled people' or as 'people (or persons) with disabilities' is a major issue. The former, (identity first language) is used where people want their disability to be acknowledged first (a deaf person). The latter (person first language) emphasizes that one is a person first and that one is not defined by any disability (person with Downs' Syndrome). For that reason this policy uses the terms interchangeably. There is a detailed discussion of this in Roy McCloughry and Krista Ewert's paper '*Disability, Language and Diversity: A Guide for the Perplexed*' which can be found [here](#). Etiquette is important in that a person should be addressed using the language they prefer.

² 2 Cor. 5:16 GNB

Remember that people with disabilities are 'we' and not 'they'. We are only temporarily non-disabled. Many, if not most of us, will acquire a disability as we grow older and will find ourselves the recipients of attitudes towards and provision for disabled people.

The starting point for reversing the negative perception of disabled people is the idea that we are all made in the *image of God*. We all reflect something of who God is. It is this starting point which confers on each human being, dignity and respect and gives them a basis for their human rights.³ The story is told of the pastor and theologian John Stott who, every Sunday would shake the hands of many of the thousand or so people who had come to hear him preach. Standing by him, his young assistant said, 'how can you do this, you are now exhausted and many of these people were wasting your time?' He replied, 'every person whose hand I shake, I remember that they are made in the image of God and that Christ died for them.'

Many of the key people in the Bible were disabled either from birth or became disabled in later life. Isaac became blind,⁴ Jacob limped⁵, Moses had a speech defect⁶, Samson died blind⁷, Mephibosheth did not have use of his legs⁸, Elijah lived with depression⁹, Eli was blind¹⁰, Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' is often interpreted as a his being visually impaired.¹¹ Indeed, when God speaks to Moses, asking him to go and challenges Pharaoh about his enslavement of the children of Israel, Moses excuses himself because he has a speech defect. At this point God responds by owning disabled people as a deliberate part of his creation. *Please, Lord," Moses replied, "I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since You have spoken to Your servant, for I am slow of speech and tongue. And the Lord said to him, 'who gave man his mouth? Or who makes the mute or the deaf, the sighted or the blind? Is it not I, the Lord?'"*¹²

Disability is no barrier to being used by God, therefore the Church needs to encourage everybody to use their gifts to further the cause of Christ.¹³ Indeed, in describing what the Church of Jesus Christ should be like, Paul says that *...our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it.*¹⁴ So, those that the world sees as weaker or less worthy of attention, the Christian community is called to place at the heart of the church to show that its ethos is entirely different from that of the world. A church that only has the powerful and articulate as its members cannot fully exemplify the Church of Jesus Christ. Those churches that respond to

³ Genesis. 1:27 NIV

⁴ Gen.27:1

⁵ Gen.32:23-33

⁶ Exod. 4:10

⁷ Judges 16

⁸ 2 Sam. 4:4

⁹ 1 Kings 19:4

¹⁰ 1 Sam. 4:15

¹¹ Acts 9:8, Gal 6:11, 2 Cor 12:7-9,

¹² Exod. 4:11

¹³ Sadly, it is the case that there are very few people with disabilities in the leadership of the Church of England. It seems that much of this is a failure at the parish or Diocesan level for disabled people to have their gifts recognised or their calling affirmed.

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 12:24 NIV

the inclusive message of the gospel to bring those on the margins of society in by saying that, 'we are not that kind of church', has missed the point of the gospel entirely.

Indeed, the risen Christ who had defeated death and subjugated all that threatened to destroy his creation was, himself, the risen but disabled Christ. When Thomas doubted who he was, Jesus said, *put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.*¹⁵ The wounds¹⁶ of the crucifixion were still there and had become the basis for his new identity. If this is true then the idea that disability is due to sin, or lack of faith cannot be supported. Any church that gives the message to its congregation that disability is equal to deficiency let alone sin, is undermining the Christian gospel. The church needs to be especially sensitive when it comes to its teaching on healing and to the way in which it offers prayer for those coming forward for public prayer who may be disabled.¹⁷ Many disabled people who no longer go to church cite their experience of being seen as 'healing fodder' as the reason for their non-attendance.

2 Access to buildings and communities.

Having access to a building is not the same as having access to a community although it forms a part of it. If a building is inaccessible, then the person cannot access the community which meets in it. This also applies to missional communities. Some churches will not have the resources to make their buildings fully accessible which is why the law only requires that adjustments should be 'reasonable'. However, a church should not wait to make 'reasonable adjustments' as required by the Equality Act 2010, only when a person wants to belong to the church or visit it. Best practice requires 'anticipatory provision'. In other words, even if there is no person in the church who appears to be d/Deaf¹⁸ a loop is provided¹⁹ as well as other assistive resources.

The focus should be not on singling out disabled people as a special group but on making adjustments which benefit all. Providing for people with disabilities is not about treating them specially, quite the opposite in fact: it is about enabling them to join in with the activities of the rest of the church community without having to be treated in a special way. A survey could be done to see what the additional needs of the congregation are. A questionnaire filled out by new people should ask about what they need to enable them to be a part of the community. But the church is interested in the answer **everyone** gives to the question, 'what do you need today to enable you to worship with us?' Only when this question is asked of *everybody* are disabled people not singled out as a 'special' group. The aim of the Church is to be an enabling community rather than a disabling one, but this applies to all.

¹⁵ 1 Jn. 20:27

¹⁶ Some would prefer to say 'scars'.

¹⁷ There is a twenty-point guide for intercessory teams who pray for people who are disabled in Roy McCloughry, *The Enabled Life: Christianity in a Disabling World (SPCK, 2013) pp 119-122*

¹⁸ d/D refers to the convention that people who are hard of hearing are referred to as deaf (with a small 'd'), whereas people who depend on British Sign Language are referred to as Deaf (with a capital D). When referred to collectively d/D is used.

¹⁹ Other forms of assistive technology can be used which are simple. For example, if reading were publicised before the service. Disabled people could bring their own resources e.g. easy read versions or iPads to enable them to access the readings.

The current guidance published by the C of E's Church Buildings Council in 2021 can be found [here](#). It is 26 pages long and some of the material is covered in this document, but it is important in that it is up to date and an official document of Archbishops' Council.

It may be worth remembering that the Equality Act 2010 defines disability as *a physical or mental impairment that has substantial and long-term adverse effect on the ability to carry out day-to-day activities*.

Where a physical feature makes it impossible or unreasonably difficult for people with disabilities to make use of a service or else to be able to use it to escape from the building in an emergency a church has a duty to take reasonable steps to:

- Remove the feature, or;
- Alter it so that it no longer has that effect, or;
- Provide a reasonable means of avoiding the feature, or;
- Provide a reasonable alternative way of making the service available to people with disabilities.

It is important to reiterate that the law require this to be anticipatory. We must ask who might come to our church, whether for a service or as a visitor or tourist, and how the needs of our present congregation may develop in the future. This of course is also the message of the Gospel! The best way to get the process started is to carry out an access audit. This is a helpful way of working out what needs to be done to the church building to make it accessible to disabled people. It can be done by a professional auditor, but a small group can carry out an initial audit using an audit template. These are readily available on some Diocesan websites or on the C of E web page *Barrier-Free Belonging*. Such a group should always have people on it who have lived experience of disability.

To give a brief overview of what constitutes the best proactive measures in aiming to be an inclusive Church the following might be a start. Some of these points are taken from the *A Place to Belong Guide* written by the C of E's Disability Task Group which can be found [here](#).

- Signage (internally and in the Churchyard) ²⁰ Please consider how easily people who are driving or walking past external notice boards and other signage will see the information there, bearing in mind that they do not already know it. Thinking of people who have a visual impairment, notices and signage need to be printed clearly with sharp colour contrast (black or a very dark colour on white or a very pale colour, or the reverse). The more concise they can be made, the less text will be needed and the clearer they will be. This is also helpful for people with learning disabilities, and for busy people who are rushing by, and who may not be able to give all your notices their full attention.
- Is the church website accessible? Does it conform to the regulations on accessibility for websites? Is information conveyed in as many formats as possible? Are there

²⁰ A useful guide to signage can be found at <https://www.signdesignsociety.co.uk>

different ways of viewing the website such as changing the font size or colour of fonts? Can language be read by a screen reader for somebody who is visually impaired? Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World wide Web, has said, *the power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect.* The W3C Web accessibility initiative can be found [here](#). Does the website use Clear Print (see below)?

- Use of PowerPoint and A/V. Audio description by speaker of the slide/AV for those who are visually impaired. Audio description is now regularly used at cinemas, theatres and operas. If it is not done, then a visual resource such as a PowerPoint slide becomes exclusive. Those speaking should be made aware that this is expected of them if they use visual presentations.
- Accessible Facilities (avoid the term Disabled Toilet(s)) Keep them clear of junk!! Of course, it is essential that these are signed clearly so that people don't have to ask where they are.
- What areas of the church are inaccessible to wheelchair users? Chancel? Can everybody access the church including visiting speakers/ celebrants? Is every possible entrance to the church level-access? Does a handrail need to be placed across the churchyard if it is to be used at any time? (Flagstones uneven etc.) Does a rubber roll need to be placed there (like a carpet) to prevent accidents? Nobody may have fallen there to date, but anticipatory provision requires that provision be made in case it occurs. There are many options. The cost of many of them is inexpensive and they can be installed easily.
- Kitchen Area. Is it accessible? Safe?
- Is there a welcome for those with learning disabilities? How can they best enjoy being a member of the worshipping community? Children with additional needs?
- Are there spaces for people who use a wheelchair without having to move chairs when they arrive (except if they want to sit in a specific area which does not have such a space)?
- Is there parking for those who somebody who would normally park in a 'disabled' parking spot or a place where they can be safely dropped off?
- Ensuring that the entrance to the church can be used by everybody despite their access needs so that they are not made to feel 'different'. Should a steward greet people at the bottom of the steps so that a person with a mobility impairment can be offered help (even if they don't want it!) Believe it or not, you may need to make it really clear where the main entrance to your church is. People with anxiety issues or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may need especially clear signage to indicate which door you expect them to use. Ideally, the main entrance will be the same one

for everyone, but if you have to ask wheelchair users to use a different one, because of level access, it is most important that this is clearly signed.

All steps, changes of level and edges of ramps must be clearly painted, taped or otherwise marked with a strongly contrasting colour or design. The contrast marking needs to be on both horizontal and vertical edges of steps. This applies both outside and inside buildings and is for the particular benefit of people who are blind or partially sighted. Sometimes there is a natural contrast of different materials, for example pale stonework against dark floor tiles. Handrails should be marked or painted in yellow and ideally be 'anti-cold' for those living with arthritis.

It is important that all glass doors have "manifestation" which helps to make them visible, again in particular for people who are blind or partially sighted. There should also be high contrast marking all around the door(s) to distinguish from the surrounding. St Nics has opaque circles in its glass doors. Is the contrast between door and surrounding adequate?

- Ensure that sound levels in the church are appropriate and a loop system is provided. Ensure that the loop is efficient in every area of the church. Regularly get feedback from hearing-aid users to see if the loop is adequate. (The loop at St Nics regularly goes down)
- Ensure that the face of a speaker can be clearly seen and train speakers to keep their head up as much as possible so that lip-reading can be done. Remember that deafness is an invisible disability. Good lighting is of course important for everyone, but especially for those who are blind or have a visual impairment, and also for people with hearing impairments. Lighting levels need to be even and constant throughout the building, rather than variable.

All of us rely to some extent on lip reading when we are listening to people, whether or not we are aware of it. For people with a hearing impairment or people who are Deaf, lip reading can be an important part of their communication. Good lighting assists greatly with this, and it is important that the whole face of the person speaking can be seen clearly, in good, even light. It is also important to ensure that people who are reading / speaking / leading worship are not standing with their back to the light, as this makes it difficult to see the face and lips clearly, as they will be in shadow. A person who is lip reading will need to be quite close to the speaker, even with good lighting, so please bear in mind that if the person leading worship moves a distance this connection may be lost.

We also need to bear in mind that not all people who are Deaf or deafened can lip read, and that even where people have learnt this skill, it is estimated that only about one third of words in the English language are "readable" by people with reduced or no hearing. Therefore, every possible assistance should be given for those who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

If you are considering a special service with low levels of lighting, for example a candlelit carol service at Christmas, please consider what effect this will have for people who are partially sighted. For example, ensure that instructions about the service are given beforehand in good lighting.

- We often joke that people in churches always sit in the same place and consider particular seats to be “theirs”. Whilst it’s great to encourage flexibility in this regard, remember that some people, particularly those on the autism spectrum, may need to have this kind of routine, and making light of it can make them feel stressed or even unsafe.
- Asking people to stand places pressure on those who cannot or experience pain (for example because of arthritis). The convention now is ‘stand if you are able’. When any physical movement is required there may well be people who cannot carry it out.
- Check whether members of the church have any allergies if food is being prepared. Have a sign for guests to remind them to tell caterers.
- Please consider how accessible service sheets are for people with different disabilities, and in particular for people with visual impairment; people with learning disabilities, and people with specific learning difficulties or dyslexia. **Clear print** guidelines require a minimum font size of 12 point, where a clear sans serif font is used (such as Arial, Franklin Gothic, Verdana, Lucida Sans.) Print should be clear and sharp, in a strong dark colour (ideally black) on a white or very pale coloured background. Many people with dyslexia find it easier to process information where there is a pale coloured background, rather than white.

Paper should be matt rather than gloss, and if double- sided printing is used, the paper needs to be weighty enough that the print does not show through. Where photos or pictures are used, captions should be printed above or below, not on top of, the picture.

A small number of **large print** copies of the same print materials should be available at every service, for people with visual impairment. This requires a minimum font size of 18 point. However, when people are known to the church it is important to ask them what their requirements are rather than making assumptions about them.

Where screens are used in worship, it is good practice to provide a small number of printed copies of the service, for those who find it difficult to look at the screens because of physical conditions, and for those who need to see the whole service before it starts, so that they know what is going to happen. (Or you may need to provide this information in some other way, for example for people on the autistic spectrum.)

Remember that the principles of clear print also apply to websites.

- If there are people at a welcome desk or stewards are greeting people, ensure that they are trained in using the appropriate language and can anticipate the needs of people coming through the door rather than being flummoxed by a request. Are they sure what to do or who to call if somebody has a medical emergency associated with a disability such as a seizure?
- Consider providing British Sign Language interpreters for the service. If you don't think there is anybody in the church who needs this, then make it known in the city that this provision has been made. Such a move is missional as some will come in because they can now access the gospel.
- Many cinemas and other places of entertainment have sessions for people living with dementia or autism among other conditions. Is there something we can learn from them in making people feel welcome?
- Not everyone has a car. So it may be that some people with disabilities can only get to a Sunday service if they are near enough to walk or cycle, or a lift can be offered. Sunday mornings may also be a difficult time for people to get to church. Most churches offer lifts to people who cannot get there otherwise. Is this well-known as a service? Should people be better informed. Local Press? Nursing Home visitors?

One idea which brings people into the church is to have a budget for taxis to bring people to and from church. Once this free service is known it may well be that people who have no means of getting to church will use the service.

- Does the church accurately portray itself with respect to access in 'A Church near you' on the C of E website?
- Are PCC discussions always recorded to show that issues relating to access and inclusion have been noted throughout. Inclusion is not a sperate subject it is like lettering though a stick of rock and is present in many subjects under consideration.
- Are disabled and older people made to feel that they are as valued as young or non-disabled people in the congregation? How could this balance be achieved or preserved?

Although these pointers can be helpful when a general discussion is taking place on a committee or PCC there is no substitute for putting budget aside for a Disability Audit by a professional auditor who can give a thorough report on the needs of the church in terms of accessibility. This would need to be supplanted by an investigation of the culture and aspirations of the church and the extent to which it is achieving any targets it has set itself.

3. Disability Friendly

There are churches which are badged as being disability friendly and this can be something, which if it is an accurate portrayal of where the church is and where it wants to be is an important missional step. Indeed, in the Diocese of Liverpool awards are given to churches or organisations which have made strides to become more disability friendly in that year. Often, such churches are also badged 'dementia friendly' or 'autism friendly'. This can be a challenge for churches where the language and concepts used are sophisticated. However, such churches are serious about making the gospel more accessible to all. Often the changes come under four headings.

- Rethink your building
- Rethink your language
- Rethink your theology
- Rethink your activity.

It may be then that NOT doing certain things is as important as doing MORE to ensure provision for people with disabilities. In terms of theology, do preachers or intercessors treat healing as the same as cure? Such a theology can be disastrous when a person with a long-term disability is prayed for to be healed when the prayer is obviously aimed at a cure.²¹ It is even more disastrous when such a prayer is aimed at changing someone with a learning disability who has no need of a cure. They are a precious creation as they are. Such disasters are some of the reasons why people with disabilities leave the church. Disabled people are not broken people waiting to be fixed.

In terms of language, certain terms are offensive and should never be used. Some of the more obvious ones are lame, retarded, spastic or mad. It's a good idea to ask how you would think if the term was used of you or a member of your family. A very helpful guide published by the government called '*Inclusive Language: Words to use and avoid when writing about disability*', can be found [here](#). It also applies to public speaking or conversation. There is also a very helpful talk by Krista Ewert entitled *Before there was a word: How to use disability language and rhetoric*, on YouTube which can be found [here](#). It's very insightful and accessible.

Being inclusive entails breaking down barriers. The most recent work on disability which has been published on the Church of England's web pages is called, *Barrier-Free Belonging* and can be found [here](#). That is the aim of every church which takes mission and fellowship seriously. It applies not only to disabled people but to non-disabled people as well. In the church, all barriers are barriers to the gospel.

Disability is not about deficiency but about diversity. It is to be celebrated as a part of God's rich creation.

Roy McCloughry

²¹ There is a detailed discussion of the difference between healing and cure in Roy McCloughry, *The Enabled Life: Christianity in a Disabling World* (SPCK, 2013) pp. 79-95