Who's Enabling Whom?

An evaluation of impact of the
Enabling Church Conference
within the Diocese of Lichfield

Dr Heather Buckingham
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BOXES:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This evaluation reports on the medium term impact of the 'Enabling Church: Everybody in!' day conference within the Diocese of Lichfield. The conference was held on 3rd June 2014 at the Bethel Convention Centre in West Bromwich. It was organised and delivered by Churches for All, a network of UK Christian disability organisations, and was supported by funding from the Bishop of Lichfield's Lent Appeal, as well as other sources. This report includes findings relating to three key themes: ministry by, with and for disabled people; inclusivity, empowerment and discipleship in local churches; and maximising the impact of large conferences within local churches.

Participants reported that the Enabling Church Conference had been a valuable source of inspiration and encouragement. The ways in which the ministry of disabled people and the diversity of the church were modelled and experienced during the conference were identified as particularly significant in this respect.

Some key impacts over the medium term were: increased legitimacy and focus given to the issue of disability and 'enabling church' within some local churches; increased confidence and awareness amongst those seeking to develop work in this area; the development of networks and relationships amongst those seeking to facilitate change; the provision of further training; small changes to practices within services and church activities; and in some cases the development of new ministries or activities involving disabled people.

The report discusses the relevance of some key theological themes identified by participants in the evaluation, including: welcome and inclusivity; marginality, vulnerability and strength in weakness; the gifted body of Christ; and suffering and healing.

Some of the main barriers to change in relation to enabling church included: lack of awareness and understanding of disability within churches; fear and lack of experience; insufficient resources (mainly people and time); and a generalised resistance to change within some churches.

Factors that contributed to change included: individual experience of disability within a congregation; the presence of disabled people exercising ministry and leadership; and a church culture and theology that sought to engage with the wider community and in which individuals were encouraged to develop and use their gifts, skills and interests. These factors form the basis of the report's recommendations to churches, which include recognising the centrality of including and empowering marginalised groups and individuals to churches' missions and values, and the potential for this to contribute to both spiritual and numerical growth.

The report's findings regarding maximising the impact of major events and conferences in local contexts emphasise the significance of investing staff time and resources in preparatory and follow up work. This seems to be particularly effective when it is relational and relatively localised (e.g. regional) in nature. It may include providing contexts for further reflection on the event's content, or more specific training or support for developing new initiatives. This evaluation suggests that without such engagement, the potential impact of a large event is likely to be significantly diminished.

This evaluation reports on the medium term impact of the 'Enabling Church: Everybody in!' day conference within the Diocese of Lichfield. The conference was held on 3rd June 2014 at the Bethel Convention Centre in West Bromwich. The premise of the conference was that: 'Every local church needs become an 'enabling church' that welcomes, includes and involves people with dementia, disability, deafness, their families and those that care for them'. The conference was organised and delivered by Churches for All, a network of UK Christian disability organisations, and was supported by funding from the Bishop of Lichfield's Lent Appeal, as well as other sources. A national event, it attracted delegates from across the UK. This evaluation focuses specifically on its impact within the Diocese of Lichfield, where a very intentional approach has been taken to following up the issues, hopes and challenges raised by the conference.

AIMS

The aims of the evaluation are two-fold:

- To understand the medium term impact that the Enabling Church conference had on local churches' engagement with and involvement of people with disabilities, including in terms of attitudes and beliefs, practices, relationships and activities.

- To better understand the way in which churches and individual Christians learn from large conferences of this kind. As one participant in the evaluation noted: *'Always the difficulty with any conference is how you follow up and make real the things through that'*. The study therefore aims to identify factors that influence the uptake and implementation of new ideas and approaches in local contexts.

A concern for the discipleship of people with and without disabilities runs through both of these aims, and the report draws on theological concepts referred to by participants in the evaluation to offer both encouragements and challenges regarding the *en*abling of disabled people within the Church, and the ways in which the presence and ministry of disabled people *en*able the rest of the Church to understand the Gospel – and what it means to be the body of Christ – in fresh and challenging ways.

The extent of the post-conference follow up work undertaken by the Diocese of Lichfield means it would be neither feasible nor meaningful to limit the scope of this evaluation to the impact of the day conference alone. Indeed, the momentum and interest generated by the conference has contributed to awareness and uptake of the subsequent training by people who did not attend the original event, increasing the extent of its influence. This report therefore also covers the impact of training and other support provided after the day conference.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The report initially focuses directly on the impacts of the conference and training that followed it. There then follows a series of discussion sections that highlight the broader findings of the

evaluation. These focus on: the theology of including and empowering disabled people within local churches; the challenges faced in seeking to do so; and the factors that seem to contribute to making change possible in this area. The report includes two boxes outlining some of the forms that 'enabling church' is taking in the Diocese of Lichfield (p. 14) and identifying some key learning points around maximising the impact of large events in local contexts (p. 26). In closing, some specific recommendations are made regarding discipleship, inclusion and empowerment in local churches, and how regional and national Christian organisations (such as Dioceses, denominations, umbrella bodies) might best facilitate this.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The research consisted of 13 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups. Interviews were conducted with individuals (and one couple) who had attended the Enabling Church conference. Participants were asked about their experiences and attitudes in relation to disability, faith and church before, during and after the conference. The majority of interviews were face to face and lasted approximately one hour, with two shorter interviews being conducted over the phone. Participants were selected to cover a range of rural and urban contexts, clergy and lay people, male and female delegates, different ages, and different levels of prior and subsequent engagement with Enabling Church related activities. Some participants had personal experience of disability in their own lives or in those of close family members.

The focus groups involved a mixture of people who had attended the conference, and those who had become involved in Enabling Church activities since. The first included participants in the Enabling Church training that took place in Autumn 2014. The second focused on a particular local area. Both were attended by three people and lasted about one hour.

The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded (except phone interviews). Participants gave consent for quotations to be used anonymously. Where quotations are used, it should be noted that these express the views and experiences of a particular individual. This is particularly important to bear in mind where participants are speaking about their own experiences of having a disability. In addition to differences in circumstances and personality, different forms of disability will effect people's engagement and participation in church in different ways.

The interviews were conducted during January and February 2015, and the focus groups took place in March and April 2015. 'Medium term' in the context of this report therefore refers to approximately six to ten months after the conference.

ON THE DAY

This section focuses on the day of the conference itself, drawing out what participants remembered as the highlights and most useful aspects, as well as things that were disappointing or less helpful.

The Enabling Church Conference included times of worship, plenary talks from a variety of speakers, and streams focusing on specific topics including deafness, dementia and ageing, family and carers, and 'disability: beyond inclusion'. Further details, recordings and transcripts of the sessions can be found on the Churches for All [website](#).

LEARNING

Participants reported that the conference was a valuable learning opportunity. Many reported that the theological input drawing out the relationships between disability and the teachings of the Bible was particularly helpful. For some this was a reminder and affirmation of what they already knew; for others it opened up new perspectives and connections.

'I found the theological input … extremely helpful. It gave a particularly Christian approach to things, whereas a lot of the discussion I had heard [elsewhere] was done from a purely pragmatic secular base.' (Focus Group 1)

'I already came with the theology of the Gospel is for all people, come as you are.… we need to be much more intentional about seeking out those who are different from ourselves. And I think the conference reinforced that theology, and just said let's get on and keep on keeping on with reaching out to people.' (Interview C)

Several participants reported that hearing from speakers who were themselves disabled brought 'life' and authenticity to the teaching, as well as a different perspective that enabled listeners to learn about the experience of someone with a particular disability and how that might affect their journey of faith and involvement in church.

'Just listening to people talking about their experiences with their disabilities, you suddenly think 'yeah, I can see that' but it's something that you'd never thought of before. You know the situation of someone being partially sighted, when they come to have a cup of tea, if the cup is a completely different colour to the colour of the table [it's easier for them to see]' (Interview K)

'…it felt so much more powerful to hear it [from someone who has a disability]' (Interview D)

'Such life from the people that were speaking: this is real stuff that people are talking about, and they're people who are living it.' (Interview L)

The practical knowledge and advice imparted in the plenary and workshop sessions was highly valued by participants: particularly those who had come wanting to learn more about a specific

disability (e.g. dementia or autism) and how to make church more accessible to people living with these conditions.

ENERGISING AND ENCOURAGING

The majority of participants interviewed reported that the conference had been an exciting and inspiring experience. Some said it helped them see afresh the value of ministries in which they were already involved, or were about to embark on. Participants also reported feeling encouraged that they were not alone in their engagement with disability in the context of the church.

'I came away re-energised with the idea that we can be more relevant where we are' (Interview C)

'The overall ethos of confidence, in terms of 'we're here as Christians together' was very, very strong. (Interview B)

'So that was the biggest thing coming away – the vibrancy, the life of it, that just said so much more because it was just more inclusive.' (Interview L)

MODELLING ENABLING CHURCH

A major contributing factor to the encouragement and inspiration mentioned above was the way in which the conference itself modelled enabling church. This was expressed in the diversity of the delegates, a large proportion of whom were people with disabilities, and amongst the speakers in the plenary sessions and workshops.

'There was lots of different people in the room who had different disabilities, and from what I saw everybody seemed really engaged. And no one was kind of segregated; it was for everybody, so it was really good that that kind of feeling came across.' (Interview G)

'Seeing other disabled ministers, and hearing speakers that weren't necessarily able-bodied. It all just felt like unbelievably good timing. This really gives me something to work with. I haven't got to reinvent a wheel here. There are people who are way ahead of me on all of this.' (Interview D)

'Mutuality is the word I would use. The conference was really good about not just coming in with a blinkered vision of…. 'we're all sorted out, we're the Christians, what can we offer to you poor disabled people'… but the mutuality of: we have so much to learn from each other' (Interview L)

CONNECTING AND RELATING

Another feature of the conference was the way it connected people with each other, and with appropriate resources and organisations. Participants valued opportunities to talk with others and learn from them, for instance during coffee breaks and interactive parts of sessions. Some identified a link between connecting with God and with other people, describing an awareness of being part of the same body of Christ, worshipping God together.

'It felt like a shared experience – because worship often doesn't feel like a shared experience because everybody's standing up except you.' (Interview D)

'the thing that I really loved the best was the times when we came out and had coffee and tea, and just shared with each other … there were complete strangers and they were sharing their testimony… It was really Spirit filled. There was that real buzz, and enthusiasm … It wasn't like: 'oh you're in a wheelchair'. Everybody was seeing everybody for who they were in Christ. I think people were inspired by the speakers, and they were inspired by the workshops, and so they came out expressing themselves….this is what heaven is, you know, that fellowship.' (Interview I)

Both disabled and non-disabled participants described being humbled and challenged by interactions they had with others, for instance:

'One lady I was showing down to the front in a wheelchair, I said to her 'would it be alright to put your chair here?' and she said 'there is a person in this chair', and that again made me think yes I should be talking to you, not merely thinking about the chair.' (Interview K)

This and other similar encounters are examples of relational 'discipling' or learning within the conference itself, but there were also efforts to establish links that would continue beyond the conference. Here the Diocesan Director of Transforming Communities played a significant part in welcoming and engaging with those attending the conference from the Diocese, and introducing people to those they may be able to work with, encourage or learn from in future.

The availability of information about organisations and specialist resources relating to disability and the church was appreciated by many participants.

'for me the main thing was about the networks, creating them, because there was a lot of stalls there with information, and I didn't honestly know that all these areas existed. I didn't know that these things went on in church… I knew we did things to help people, but I didn't realise to what extent … And it's great because then you can go back to your church and if someone asks you a question you've got someone you can refer them on to.' (Interview G)

UNCOMFORTABLE OR FRUSTRATING ASPECTS

Overall, feedback from evaluation participants was very positive, but there were some frustrations.

Two interviewees felt there was too much unnecessary involvement of non-disabled people 'up front'. However, it was also acknowledged that one did not necessarily need to be able to speak from personal experience in order to make a valid contribution.

Two other participants felt they were being challenged about things to which their churches lacked the capacity to respond, giving rise to feelings of frustration or defensiveness.

'[I felt] A little bit of frustration in that I couldn't see how it would be possible to get things going in our church, just because we're very short of people power.' (Interview F)

'I think many of the sessions made you feel a bit uncomfortable. And many times I guess people would actually say, 'hang on, these people are asking for a bit too much, this is not realistic in a listed building or whatever'. But then it's saying well actually no hang we need to hear their voice and actually they do have a rough time... But when you go into the third group session and there's that dynamic again, you sort of think, here we go again there's another lot of militant people having a go at me, and then you start to get a bit defensive really.' (Interview J)

Some concerns were also raised about the sense of different disability groups competing for their own interests. However, others suggested that – whilst it required a great deal of grace – most delegates and speakers, although passionately concerned about one aspect of disability, also had a concern for the issue of disability as a whole.

On a practical note, although the venue was largely deemed to be very suitable for the purpose, several participants pointed out that there had been long queues for registration, and some congestion moving between venues.

AFTER THE CONFERENCE

This section summarises what participants identified as the main impacts that the conference has had on them and the churches they are involved in over the medium term. It includes changes in attitudes, values, practices, relationships and activities.

Churches and individuals involved in the evaluation were at different stages in their engagement with disability before the conference: some had been on a very personal journey over many years, others attended out of interest and had little previous experience of working with people with disabilities. It is also not possible to entirely separate out the influence of different events, relationships, experiences and beliefs on participants' discipleship and local ministries, which of course are shaped by all of these, as well as other factors.

In view of these two caveats, one cannot generalise about a 'before' and 'after' the conference, at a Diocesan level: for this reason, coverage of some of the issues raised is reserved for the more generalised discussion sections later in this report.

LEGITIMACY AND FOCUS

Several participants described how, as a large event, the conference had helped put disability and inclusiveness on the agenda in their church, or had given increasing focus and attention to ongoing conversations about this. Participants had sought to disseminate insights gained in various ways including PCC meetings, staff and volunteer meetings, Parish publications, conversations with individuals, and sermons.

'It legitimised an agenda… It gave me next steps which were easy to work with.' (Interview D)

It provided a talking point for many, many, further conversations. So that having had a very significant day, I was then quite legitimate in saying: so now what are we going to do? So it was a good platform.' (Interview B)

CONFIDENCE AND AWARENESS

Several participants spoke about how the conference had given them greater confidence in relating to disabled people, and in their ministry, whether than involved working with disabled people, or ministering as a disabled person. As well as increased knowledge and awareness, for some, the recognition that one was part of a bigger 'movement' of people engaged in this area had been helpful when returning to their local context.

'being part of a big group like that, it does give you a lift – especially when the group you're involved with locally is quite small' (Interview L)

'We often find that a lot of older people [in care homes] do have Christian beliefs and sometimes I've not had the confidence to be able to talk about them, but now I feel like I can because of what I took away from some of the sessions' (Interview G)

For some, the encouragement that the welcoming of all people –especially those who are in some way marginalised – is central to the gospel message, helped them to persevere and seek to engage others in the work and initiatives they were already involved in.

'I think [the impact on me] as a minister [has been] to influence change within my churches, and to challenge my other ministers, my ministry team, wardens and everyone else who serves about being inclusive, and being more intentional about our mission and ministry with people with disabilities.' (Interview C)

'It gave me enormous confidence in how significant this is to the gospel. And whilst I would have had the intellectual acknowledgement of that beforehand, it made it much more of a personal confirmation.' (Interview B)

Some participants were engaging in further learning as a result of attending the conference, including reading books they had bought there and participating in training courses, as well as helping arrange training for others within their churches and local areas.

RELATIONSHIPS

Growth in awareness and confidence had enabled some respondents to engage with disabled people in their churches and communities in a more open way.

'I am more relaxed in my engagement with people living with disability: [this] is quite a significant change in the last six months. Exposure is key. Exposure has made happen in real what I would have understood in abstract. Exposure also allows risk taking, where one can engage with somebody who's got a disability and overcome the anxiety of what happens if I behave in a way that's unhelpful, inappropriate, and insensitive. And because I've interacted so much more, I've found that taking those risks is very manageable.' (Interview B)

Another respondent described the ministry they had begun to develop, since attending the conference:

'I'm seeing who is on the fringe of church, disabled or not – who's not being heard? who's got gifts and energy? who doesn't have confidence? – and I try and take them with me…. I'm doing some mentoring with [an individual], and she is now planning and leading the service in the care home, at least as ably as me …' (Interview D)

Others were building on connections made with specific disability organisations at the conference, and were exploring possibilities for further collaboration at a local level.

PRACTICES AND ACTIVITIES

A number of participants gave examples of small changes they had made in their churches as a result of attending the conference. These included improving signage for toilets, and making existing activities (e.g. Ladies' Guild) more accessible for those in the early stages of dementia. One incumbent gave an example of an effort to make a Sunday service more enabling for people with disabilities:

'So for instance a couple of weeks ago I did a service without any liturgy, and I was really encouraged by how much some of the disabled adults were able to be involved and speak up and out, participate … [the conference] has been a helpful springboard to think about how we make disciples of those with a spectrum of needs.' (Interview C)

One participant described how they had sought simple but significant changes at a Deanery level, asking service leaders to use the words 'please stand if you are comfortably able', rather than creating the expectation that everyone should stand for worship or certain parts of the service.

Another person explained how the conference was contributing to an ongoing process of reflection in her church about how they could make it a better environment for everyone in the local community. In some churches ramps and disabled toilets had been added or were under consideration: often this was triggered by the needs of a particular individual, rather than the conference itself.

However, some participants faced opposition when they tried to make changes. One vicar's suggestion to swap some pews around to better accommodate wheelchairs was strongly opposed by members of the church including some who had attended the conference, and hasn't happened. Some acknowledged that little had been done in response to the conference, with one saying:

'I enjoyed it. But from the point of view of translating it into church life or personal life, probably not very much [impact].' (Interview F)

Reasons for lack of impact in certain contexts are discussed later in this report.

There was a strong emphasis on long term impact in the way in which the Diocese prepared for, promoted and followed up the conference: this was led by the Director of Transforming Communities, who commented that

'The conference was big enough to put disability on the agenda. Otherwise it could always be perceived to be something of minor significance. So the conference had an impact, and then we had to harness the impact.'

The harnessing of this impact involved the continued development of relationships and networks between those who were interested or already actively involved in various forms and expressions of 'enabling church'. Another aspect was the provision of training, including a four day Enabling Church training course developed and delivered in collaboration with Churches for All.

THE COURSE ITSELF

The course aimed to improve participants' theological understanding of disability; to raise awareness of the resources available to promote the sharing of ministry with those who experience disabilities and their carers; and to support the development of disability-inclusive, parish-based initiatives. It was a pilot course, involving local and national contributors with a range of specialisms in disability ministry.

Evaluation participants who had taken part in the course were very positive about the experience. Often it was the sharing and interaction between participants that seemed to have impacted them most. One person emphasised the value of being able to discuss in a smaller group context some of the ideas that the larger conference had raised, and of the opportunity to address specific issues they were grappling with in their context.

'If I'd just done the one day by itself, that would have had some impact, but it's a bit more high and dry in the great big conference set up from the feel of coming into a room full of 25-30 people for the four session course. You just know that you're going to encounter the individuals. 'We are the body of Christ' kind of comes to life in a new way when it's that sort of size, because you really do journey together, because you can share the stories. That's what changes in the end, that's the transformation point, where you just are hearing and sharing lots of stuff. Its grassroots stuff really, which you can't quite do at the conference level.' (Interview L)

'There was a very good mix of both lecture material and small group material…. But it was the participants in the group that really brought a new dimension to it.' (Focus Group 1)

One participant described how a person with one kind of disability had described the kinds of surface that made it easiest for them to be mobile, which turned out to be surfaces that made it more difficult for another member of the group.

Participants also appreciated the emphasis on action, with the last session requiring a focus on what they were going to do differently.

Participants described a variety of ways in which the Enabling Church training was having an influence in their local context. For example, in one area, five people had attended the training together: they subsequently invited the Director of Transforming Communities to facilitate a local workshop on Enabling Church for clergy, church wardens and other interested people. Through this, a decision was made to focus on dementia, and a programme of work has been put together to take this forward including Dementia Sunday services, commissioning Dementia Friends, a Dementia Friendly Church Lent course , and the provision of home group materials on dementia and the Bible.

Different individuals had taken different 'action points' away from the training. One participant was looking to put into practice the relational approach to finding out about the experiences, needs and gifts of disabled people in her church that had been modelled on the course:

'…one of the things that came out of the four session course was how powerful it is just to talk to people, without it having to be too formal. Would it be possible to have a cup of coffee with perhaps the six or eight people I know in our church who are living with disability?... 'What works and what doesn't work with our church for you?' … I'd love to do that.' (Interview L)

For another, it was the Enabling Church audit that stood out:

'we did [the audit] in small groups on the church that we were part of, and actually I was astonished that the church only fulfilled one criteria for disability access. I was appalled…. Some of it we could have done quite easily, like we could have marked out some disabled parking spaces at the front of the church, instead of for who was first there.' (Focus Group 1)

Some participants emphasised the significance of the Diocese's endorsement of the training when seeking to draw issues associated with disability to the attention of leaders and congregations locally:

'The Enabling [Church] training – because it's the Diocese – really makes quite a significant difference in terms of my confidence. I'm just bringing a message, I'm not driving an agenda. And that's very different, and helpful.' (Interview D)

There was a desire to see the training made more widely available within the Diocese and beyond, particularly for those involved in church leadership:

'More training for anybody who wants to participate would be wonderful. But the other thing that I think would be really valuable is that I think every training curate and every local lay minister ought to just do this Enabling Church course … the battle that I felt I was facing – it was not a battle against those in the congregation, it was a battle against clergy.' (Focus Group 1)

Box 1: What forms is 'Enabling Church' taking in the Diocese of Lichfield?

Feedback on the Enabling Church conference, training and related work has emphasised changes (or resistance to change) in church 'cultures' and in relationships. However, activities can be an important vehicle in building relationships, and in changing attitudes, priorities and expectations within a church and local community. They can also be an expression – or evidence – of change in these respects. The list below gives a flavour of some of the activities through which 'Enabling Church' is being brought into being in the Diocese of Lichfield.

Disabled people involved in church leadership and serving in other ways	Church groups for people with learning disabilities	Adapted buildings – e.g. lifts, ramps and hearing loops
Pastoral teams offering practical, emotional and spiritual support	Use of study materials, e.g. Lent course on ageing, home group series on mental health	Changes to service sheets, large print books, use of power points, sign language, to make services more accessible
Ministry in homes for the elderly and those with learning disabilities	Dementia café-style events	Deanery Curate with a focus on Enabling Church
Diocesan Dementia Support Worker	Projects aimed at making church more inclusive (for all, not just disabled people)	One to one conversations
Dementia Friends	Dementia Sundays	Work-place ministry: Christians who work with people with disabilities as part of their job
	Churches working in partnership with statutory or voluntary agencies	

THEOLOGY, DISABILITY AND DISCIPLESHIP

Those taking part in the evaluation were asked about how their attitudes to and experiences of disability were influenced by their Christian faith. This section reviews some of the key themes in their responses, all of which have broader relevance beyond the issue of disability itself.

WELCOME AND INCLUSIVITY

Many participants pointed to the example of Jesus in relating to, valuing, and ministering to people from all kinds of backgrounds, including those with disabilities. Being inclusive and welcoming were identified by some as important principles in the Kingdom of God and consequently ones that churches should seek to embody.

'My Christian faith is based on Jesus Christ, and so I look to him to see how he responds to different people in the Bible. And he is very inclusive. So obviously that has a big influence on me. And I do challenge myself – because we've all got prejudices – to say this is what Jesus wants. And having the Holy Spirit inside me, you do get this kind of 'uh-uh, this isn't quite right [name]'' (Interview I)

'Those who are different to yourself can actually speak to you about the Kingdom of God... I think when I have folk in our congregation who are disabled, their visible presence, as well as when they speak out, is prophetic. Because they're speaking out God's word and showing that God's kingdom is inclusive for people.' (Interview C)

'The thing that unites us is our relationship with Jesus. And we look at the Gospel and we see that Jesus opened wide the gates and that, you know for everybody.' (Interview I)

Reference was also made to the biblical teaching that everyone is made in the image of God, as a basis for valuing and giving dignity to everyone.

MARGINALITY, VULNERABILITY AND STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

Related to the theme of welcome is the attention given in the Bible, and in the ministry of Jesus as it is recorded there, to those who are in some way marginalised in society, be that because of illness, disability, poverty, their occupation, their life choices, family situation, or for other reasons. Participants highlighted this, but also went further, pointing out that brokenness, weakness and marginality are important to the Gospel message, and are aspects of human experience within which the power, presence and character of God can be encountered and made known. These teachings are relevant for all Christians, but participants suggested that people with disabilities may have a particular part to play in helping the wider church, and society as a whole, to better understand and experience them.

'through becoming disabled I've had to start wrestling with the theology of 'what does it mean to be diminished', and actually the Christian faith does have a story that goes with you in this. Our King's resurrected body was broken, and wasn't made different actually.' (Focus Group 2)

'It started to become visible to me that actually my body and my frailties were a gift that God was using quite explicitly, because of the power dynamic shift' (Interview D)

'I went through a phase where brokenness or vulnerability became quite a key element of understanding the Christian faith… and in that it was contrasted with a sense of power and achievement and success, and I felt quite strongly that the church would benefit from understanding the spirituality of people who live with disability, rather than trying to push that away. So a Christian faith that is predicated upon weakness, and grace in weakness, has a lot to learn from people who live with disability' (Interview B)

Some participants – including people who were themselves disabled – spoke of the way in which living with a disability could challenge preconceptions about what really matters in life and about what defines a person's worth or value. This was felt to be particularly the case in a culture – in society, and often within churches too – that is orientated around 'success', consumerism and achievement. This is not to suggest that those with a disability cannot themselves be successful, consumerist, or highly achieving, but rather that people whose lives are marked by suffering, exclusion or marginalisation in all its forms can often communicate with great authority and authenticity regarding what matters most about human beings and their relationships. A number of participants mentioned that the writings of Jean Vanier and Henri Nouwen had been particularly significant in shaping their thinking and experience in relation to this theme.

'My only real hope that enables me to keep doing it is that those people who, like me, thought that my value was measured in what I do realise that their value is measured in who you are, and that actually not being able to do as much is what the church needs to hear. And that you need to be part of church. It's liberation theology, it's not to do with disability. It's about people who aren't heard speaking, because that's the only way we're actually church. The Kingdom of God needs to look like something that's actually quite different – rather than an organisation that has a similar power structure to other areas.' (Interview D)

'Perhaps disabilities give a gift of understanding to society, that the caring version is every bit as important as the careerist or consumerist version of humanity.' (Interview J)

'I'm quite convinced that those people who speak from what other people might perceive to be the margins, quite often speak from where God actually is.' (Interview B)

THE GIFTED BODY OF CHRIST

Importantly – and not in contradiction to the above – there was a strong emphasis on acknowledging the gifts that disabled people have as members of the body of Christ, and the importance of these being exercised, both for the building up of the church, and for its witness in wider society.

[People living with a disability are] not so much as a group of people to help…but to find Christ within those members of the body, which is a group of people who largely find it harder to access the main gatherings. So I would always come from a position that God's love is…that we can learn from each other, and that actually it's ministry with rather than to.' (Focus Group 2)

The level and nature of a persons' disability, as well as the gifts and skills they have as an individual, will affect the form that their participation might take, but this is also likely to be influenced by the attitudes and actions of other members of the church, including leaders, and the extent to which efforts are made to intentionally release them into using their gifts, by opening up opportunities and providing encouragement to do so. One respondent explained how they were working through this in one particular ministry:

'We're all called to the Great Commission, and people with dementia are no different to anybody else, we're all called…to spread the good news of Christ. And then it makes us change our mind set to ask 'how do I become the learner', how do I become the person that's listening to this person, and what they're trying to communicate to me… That's a challenge for me: how do I – not only help people to fully participate in church life – but how do I enable them to be able to express their Christian faith? How do I change me, so that the richness that these people give us if we only have the eyes to see, and the ears to listen, and the head, the attitude, to take it on: how do we change us and our perspective, so that we can really get the most out of what these people have to offer us.' (Interview I)

The importance of the *whole* congregation understanding their identity as part of the body of Christ was highlighted as an important factor in enabling disabled people to play their part within this:

'It's a long way to shift the mentality from the 'doers' and the 'done to' to 'here we are as a body'. It only happens through God and the Spirit living in you.' (Interview D)

'It's when we all fully participate that the lifeblood [of the body of Christ] really flows.' (Interview L)

SUFFERING AND HEALING

People's experiences of disability bring questions of suffering, justice and healing to the fore in a way that can raise difficult theological questions for individuals, families, churches and communities. This can lead to fearfulness and withdrawal in relationships if not addressed sensitively and well. However, a number of participants who had experienced disability themselves or within their immediate families spoke of how they had had to work through these questions as part of their discipleship and relationship with God:

'Gradually God has brought some sense to 'where is God in this painful situation', we find him in the hard times, as well as the good times. And what we've found is that [our child's] disability has often been a bridge between us and other people, to show that we've got real lives with real issues.' (Interview C)

'I found with that [our child's disability] that you either cope with that with God's help, or you didn't cope….everybody is made in God's image. So that really was the way we came through it. So our faith… very much shaped our ability to cope.' (Interview E)

'You always know when people are living with anything which overwhelms, challenges the boundaries, it takes you deeper into love really, and into what the Good News can possibly be. It expands your horizons.' (Interview L)

These individuals had found that the teachings of their faith and their relationship with God and with others enabled them to incorporate the suffering associated with disability into their discipleship.

Christian teachings about healing were mentioned by only a few respondents, with those that did refer to it giving some rather different perspectives. One participant said that they avoided the use of biblical passages about miraculous healings in certain contexts, because they felt they were offensive to disabled people, stating that:

'actually a lot of the language in the Bible about people who are blind or deaf is exceedingly negative' (Interview J)

This did not reflect the views of most participants; however, it does point to the diversity of perspectives on Christian teaching on healing, and the need for care, sensitivity and wisdom in teaching on, talking about and indeed exercising healing ministry. One participant explained how they reconciled a range of different experiences in relation to praying for healing for their disabled child:

'So we know that God can heal, we know that he doesn't necessarily heal, but he's still there to support you and help you and so on.' (Interview E)

This section highlights some of the challenges identified by the evaluation: it deals first with some of those experienced by disabled people who are involved (or seeking to be involved) in local churches, and secondly with challenges that make it difficult for local churches to become more enabling and inclusive for disabled people. The first section is relatively brief because understanding people's personal experiences of disability was not the main focus of the research: as such, it is not by any means exhaustive, but gives a flavour of the issues raised by those interviewed.

CHALLENGES FACED BY CHRISTIANS WITH A DISABILITY

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND EXCLUSION

One participant explained how their particular disability made it difficult to talk to other people at church, saying:

'It's difficult mixing with mainstream Christians, because they are so quick and fast.' (Interview M)

For this individual to communicate, they required more time than most people in their church were able or willing to give. They explained how they needed to be able to communicate with other Christians to help them along their faith journey:

'You can talk to [another disabled] person, but if they're not a Christian, it's not the same. For instance, if you want to talk about how you understand what Jesus is asking you to do.' (Interview M)

Non-disabled participants acknowledged that there was sometimes a fearfulness or anxiety that needed to be overcome when relating to someone who is disabled; thus it would not be surprising if there were many people in churches for whom this continued to be a barrier, leaving disabled Christians more vulnerable to social isolation than others within church communities. This seemed to be less the case where an individual had *become* disabled and was already known in the church.

DISEMPOWERMENT

Feeling disempowered was identified as a particular problem for some disabled people, particularly where they may be unable to serve in certain ways that are valued in the church, or where they are not expected to contribute, but only to receive. It was acknowledged that churches' provision of practical help and support to those who are unable to do things for themselves or their families due to illness or disability was important and valuable in certain circumstances. However, sometimes an emphasis on doing things for people could lead to a lack of recognition of their potential to contribute themselves. One participant put it this way:

'I think disabled people feel very unempowered in church. I had that tension in me: 'well I can't do it because I am disabled, and you never see anybody disabled ministering'… But actually those are just things that we're just really used to …they're not consciously thought through, they're far more culturally inherited, and it is out of kindness….but it is always the same people who are doing things,

and it's rarely the people with some kind of disability, because there are people who are able-bodied who want to do it.'

PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF DISABILITY

The physical and psychological effects of disability themselves pose challenges for many disabled people when it comes to involvement in church. Participants reported difficulty in accessing church buildings and particular parts of churches in a wheelchair for example. Toilet facilities were often unsuitable for disabled people, with the doubling up of toilet areas as store cupboards in some churches making this more problematic still.

Expectations about physical participation in worship services (such as standing for parts of the liturgy), or about the level of noise or disturbance that is acceptable, can affect the extent to which people with a disability and their families feel welcomed and are able to participate in these gatherings.

CHALLENGES WITHIN AND FOR CHURCHES

LACK OF AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING

A number of participants identified a lack of awareness about disability amongst their church congregation as a factor that made it difficult to create an environment in which disabled people were welcome. One respondent explained how having somebody with dementia come into the service had been '*problematic to deal with in the service context*', saying:

'We're rather an elderly church, and you know what it's like…when somebody starts calling out things and doing things, there's a bit of tut tutting that goes on. So you really need to educate everybody else.' (Interview F)

Another gave a similar account:

'Sometimes people are too focussed on timings, like the rituals about the church, and if they had someone that had dementia or was in a wheelchair and we needed to stop for a minute to make it work for them, sometimes you'll get a nod or a shake of the head. It's all about people's understandings, and sometimes they don't realise what the person's going though.' (Interview G)

FEAR, AND LACK OF CONTACT

Fear was acknowledged to be a factor that prevented non-disabled members of churches from building and deepening relationships with disabled people. Often this was a fear of causing offence or 'getting it wrong'.

'Any encounter with disability is quite personally threatening, and I think that's a very natural part of human nature… very often people withdraw because it doesn't feel good.' (Interview B)

'People are still wary of disability, whether it's mental or physical' (Focus Group 1)

'Fear feels to me like the biggest block, and that manifests itself in all sorts of ways. I think we fear to engage with things that we would dread for ourselves. I think we fear caring about things that we might have to try and do something about. We fear that we're not able to make any changes so perhaps better just not look. You know, just keeping the graveyard mowed is enough – too much – for a small congregation sometimes.' (Focus Group 2)

PEOPLE, TIME AND BUILDINGS (RESOURCES)

One of the most frequently cited barriers to change was having insufficient numbers of motivated and available people to initiate and take forward changes.

'Finding the two or three people with some energy to put into it is the key difficulty. Because all those who are keen on it are already doing half a dozen other things.' (Interview A)

'There is a lot of desire to do [these things within the church], but not enough people with the time and the push to get things going.' (Interview E)

'Often it's the same small group of people spreading themselves thinner and thinner. It's the same people doing everything.' (Focus Group 2)

This was a particular issue where congregations were ageing and dwindling in numbers: one participant described how there were simply not enough people in the church to do respond to the needs they saw locally. Survival was seen as the more pressing issue:

'we actually need to reach out to the younger families even more, or else I don't think our church is going to be there in five or ten years' time.' (Interview F)

In terms of physical accessibility, the age and design of many traditional church buildings – and the resources that would be required to adapt them – posed a major challenge.

'…being an old church, it's got lots of things that are quite difficult … There is a step from the centre aisle to where the seats are. So it's very difficult to make it easier for people who don't see well, or walk with sticks…' (Interview E)

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Some participants – both clergy and lay people – had encountered opposition in their churches when they tried to implement changes (e.g. to signage, or rearranging pews to accommodate wheelchairs) as a result of the Enabling Church conference or training. This often seemed to be part of a more generalised resistance to change, rather than one that was specifically opposed to the inclusion of disabled people.

'The people who opposed it are people who don't like change, and believe that people have to fit into the vacant places of the church, not that the church has to accommodate people.' (Interview J)

'The pastoral team in the church definitely get it, but there are still a minority of people who have been there a long time and think it's their role to keep the church the same, it shouldn't change.' (Interview G)

'There are some churches where the PCC think they've got it all covered, and they won't listen. Because we should be all inclusive. We learnt a lot, but it's trying to teach our PCC.' (Focus Group 1)

THEOLOGICAL AND ECCLESIOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

The ability to engage sensitively but confidently with the theological issues outlined earlier in this report affected a churches' capacity to welcome and enable disabled people. A church's ecclesiology – the way in which it understands and articulates what it means to be church – also had an important part to play. It seemed to be the case that churches which understood themselves more as organisations serving particular functions were likely to have greater difficultly in incorporating disabled people and enabling them to use their gifts and skills than those where there was a strong emphasis on the church as a 'body', made up of parts with different abilities and equal value, and where the participation of all is required for the flourishing of the church and the wider community.

The extent to which as church saw itself as – or functioned as – a community was also significant:

'Take Alzheimer's for example…you need to get alongside people, but if you're in a situation where people just tend to say hello and go away again, how do you…that's very often effectively what happens. I mean loneliness is a major factor.' (Focus Group 1)

Certain models of church leadership and authority (both implicit and explicit) seemed to make it more difficult to implement change; either because the vicar was expected to take the lead on every issue, or because longer-standing members of churches did not enable newcomers to exercise leadership or take initiative.

'Despite the fact that it's a fairly middle class congregation, and people have or have had responsible jobs, they don't on the whole want to take a lead on setting something up, to show that initiative or whatever.' (Interview A)

'The longer you've been coming to this church, the higher the status you are, therefore [the more] influence you should have. And therefore new comers are at the bottom of the hierarchy. I think that's the biggest problem.' (Interview J)

WHAT MAKES ENABLING CHURCH WORK?

THE IMPACT OF INDIVIDUALS AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

The presence of an individuals or families with personal experience of disability within a church congregation was repeatedly identified as a key factor in bringing about change at a local level:

'The coalition of the willing very often happens because some of the key people in the church have direct experience of disability…. Very often I've encountered a congregation that is producing every Sunday the hymns in braille, or adjusted the layout of the church, because of one individual. So very often a real person will bring about some significant change.' (Interview B)

While you would hope that you would have everything organised for every disability as people walk in, in pragmatic terms you actually deal with the situation as you find it. So if you haven't got people with, who come in wheelchairs, or with dementia….wheelchairs we can certainly cope with and we do have somebody who comes occasionally with a wheelchair. (Interview F)

'I think my church is having to go along that path [of including people with disabilities] anyway, because some of the regular congregation are affected recently with disablement and dementia, so it's something that we're on a learning curve ourselves with.' (Focus Group 2)

Often, it was personal experience that had motivated participants to become involved in working to improve the experience of disabled people in church, or to offer particular kinds of support or ministry.

'I found my way round the social care system because I was fighting for [my spouse], and now I'm using that for the rest' (Focus Group 1)

'God will use the way I am now hopefully to help other people, and for other people to realise that church is open for anybody.' (Focus Group 2)

INVOLVEMENT AND EXAMPLE AS CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

Seeing disabled people ministering to others, including (but not exclusively) in roles such as preaching or leading services and in positions of leadership can have a significant impact on changing people's attitudes towards and expectations of disabled people within the church. This includes disabled people's perceptions of their own potential and gifts, as well as those of non-disabled people.

'The more people can see the youngsters, and people with learning disabilities, and people in wheelchairs actually at the front, and ministering to us, the more people are going to say, well I've got a friend who's got a son with learning disabilities, and he would really enjoy coming to these services…' (Interview I)

One participant referred to the power of '*seeing it possible*' in inspiring others to exercise ministry. Another explained how seeing another person with a disability preaching and leading services had given them the confidence to come back to church after having become disabled.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP

Contexts where enabling church impact and activity had been greatest were those where an intentional, relational approach had been taken. This included getting to know the individuals and families affected by disability within a church personally and asking about their needs and concerns. It also included taking a relational approach to influencing and managing change, taking time to listen to the stories of different members of the congregation and understanding the challenges faced by the church as a whole. Relationships are the conduits through which the individual experiences above can benefit and shape the rest of the church; consequently they can also be important pathways to changes in practices and activities.

SMALL CHANGES THAT MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

Small changes were often sufficient to make a significant difference: where this was recognised, some of the resource-based barriers to change were removed.

'*Somebody in a wheelchair said to me 'it almost brings me to tears in a service when somebody choses to stay sitting beside me in solidarity when we sing a hymn'. To hear that from somebody, you think, golly there are really things, things we can do that can make all the difference' (Interview L)*

'*Most of the buildings are not going to get significantly changed, but there are small things that would open them up quite a lot, but that has to come from the relational motivation, because that's the place that people will find it in themselves to make those changes.' (Interview D)*

THEOLOGY MATTERS

To support any depth of engagement with and participation of disabled people, a church needs a robust and sensitively articulated theology of healing, suffering, brokenness and marginality: it cannot be afraid of these issues, or avoid them.

'*It's an issue that affects us all: we are all going age, we are all going to get less vigorous one way or another, and the message is that that isn't something to be terrified of, rather an answer that there's beauty in the brokenness.'(Focus Group 2)*

'*[The main challenge] is a spiritual one, more so than cultural and context. I think that the main hurdle is complacency and not in an arrogant sense, but just because we can become ignorant of other people's context. And so the need then is to teach. And the teaching comes in two forms: it's telling and speaking from God's word, but also showing, I think people can be encouraged by modelling. So if they see that we're spending some money on this, or …in this part of the church calendar we're going to be doing this for this group of folk at our special needs home – why are we doing that? It's because it's part of the gospel. So yes I think it's a spiritual barrier rather than anything else.' (Interview C)*

COMMUNITY MATTERS

The kind of community expressed in a local church had a significant impact on how easy or difficult it was to make changes towards becoming more enabling for disabled people. Implementing change following on from the conference and training seemed to be easier in churches where there was an expectation that members of the congregation would use their gifts and skills to develop (as well as sustain) the ministries of the church.

'Change requires – firstly that the congregation recognises the need, and secondly that there are two or three people to really champion it.' (Interview A)

It also seemed to be the case that it was easier for churches to welcome and involve disabled people in cases where church congregations were strongly orientated towards caring for and ministering to the whole of the local community, as well as one another.

'Where people long for a church to be diverse and inclusive, then it's very natural to include people living with disability….' (Interview B)

It is worth noting that where significant changes had been made, individuals involved in instigating them frequently spoke about the development of their own relationship with God and their discipleship. One participant observed:

'I think there's something happening [in this area of enabling church], and God is enabling things to happen.' (Focus Group 2)

Another noted:

'It's all about one person at a time, and their own encounter with themselves and God' (Focus Group 2)

SUPPORT BEYOND THE LOCAL

Finally, the support offered – in this case by the Diocese of Lichfield and Churches for All – from outside the local context was very important in helping those leading and ministering to be appropriately resourced, and in giving legitimacy to their endeavours. One participant hoped for still more of this input, explaining the benefits it would bring:

'It would help to share the vision with someone higher up, and for them to come and enthuse with me, or for them to help me to articulate it a bit more precisely. To help people to see that this is part of a bigger picture – it's not just something that we're doing here, but it's part of what the Diocese is encouraging.' (Interview A)

Box 2: Maximising the impact of large events at a local level

- Large events often provide inspiration and encouragement – people often need more **targeted support** to work through and implement ideas that resonate with them or are **locally relevant**

- Enthusiasm can be quickly lost if individuals return to unsupportive contexts – **supportive relationships** beyond these may need to be built: '*The big conference by itself is a really good starter, but in itself, it perhaps isn't quite joined up enough, without that middle step of something else to help me travel with people who I might be able to travel on with locally to help…*'

- Subsequent input that focusses on investing in individuals, supporting and providing resources is more likely to be well received than that which makes demands or asks for evidence of outcomes

- Not everyone will be in a position to take things further – focus on those who have the passion and energy to do so: '*I enthuse, and if anybody resonates with that enthusiasm then I work with them. But if people need to be convinced then I don't spend time convincing them.*'

- Conferences can be a good place to introduce and connect people, but smaller group settings are more likely to foster relationships of mutual support in the longer term

- People genuinely value **exposure to a wide range of organisations and resources**: large events allow access to material relating to 'niche' interests that people may not realise are catered for

- **Supportive 'outsiders'** can help keep things on the agenda after the conference, and are important in helping those who may be passionate but not established in a particular ministry to gain **credibility** and the space and local support needed to develop new initiative and effect change

- There may be **a right (and wrong) time** for participants and their churches to engage with the specific issue – keep doors (and communication channels) open so that networks or resources can be dipped into at a later date

FOR DISCIPLESHIP, INCLUSION AND EMPOWERMENT IN LOCAL CHURCHES

- **Mainstream 'enabling church'**: help those in the congregation to see welcoming and including disabled people as part of living out their faith authentically, not as a specialist interest

- Acknowledge, encourage and **give appropriate opportunities** to those who have a particular interest and gifting in this area, which may often be related to personal experience

- **Small and inexpensive changes** can have a significant effect on disabled people's experience of church – and can help to raise awareness and change attitudes in the whole church

- If you are adapting a building or making other substantial changes, **talk to the people** whose needs you are responding to, to make sure it will actually meet them. Be sure to talk to more than one person, since needs may differ or conflict. Also ensure that equipment (e.g. hearing loops) are properly used once installed

- Don't underestimate the **power of example**. This includes the example of people with a disability exercising ministry, and of the relationships non-disabled people in the church model with those who are disabled.

- **Recognise the wider benefits**. Becoming an enabling church for people with disabilities can contribute to both the **spiritual and numerical growth** of congregations, by reducing the barriers to participation for all, and by deepening and maturing people's faith as they engage with challenging, but widely experienced, issues.

- **Ask for help**: people attending the conference were surprised at the range of resources available

FOR REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CHRISTIAN ORGANISATIONS

- An emphasis on **training and empowering disabled people** to exercise ministry – including **leadership** – within the church will have a significant impact on attitudes, practices and discipleship both within and beyond the church

- Large organisations have an important role to play in the **'mainstreaming'** of enabling church, and larger events can be strategic contexts in which to **challenge pre-conceptions**

- Translating the inspiration, ideas and energy generated by large events into practice at a local level can be very challenging, and momentum can be quickly lost: plans and resources should be put in place for **follow up work and support**, recognising that engagement with these will not be ubiquitous or predictable.

- Providing resources to help churches conduct **enabling church audits** may be beneficial

- The provision of **training and awareness raising for 'non specialists'** in this area has the potential for significant impact: clergy may not always be the ones taking the lead on disability in a particular church, but their awareness and confidence in engaging with it can make a substantial difference.