

ENABLING CHURCH

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A Bible-based resource towards
the full inclusion of disabled people

GORDON TEMPLE with LIN BALL



Disabled people inspiring faith without limits



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Foreword

One of the things I welcome about this creative and timely book is its confidence that Scripture is the starting point for thinking about disability. For some decades activists and academics have been debating disability issues, often expressing radical and new ideas. Yet the Church has taken some time to catch on to the idea that some of our perspectives on disability are being challenged. Words like ‘charity’ are now seen as inappropriate and are being replaced with the concepts of ‘rights’ and ‘justice’. The idea of doing something ‘for’ disabled people is being replaced by disabled people doing things for themselves in partnership with others, wherever possible.

The idea that disability is a deficiency in the body – a deviation from normality – has been challenged by the recognition that the word ‘disabled’ is also a verb. People with impairments are ‘being disabled’ by societal attitudes as well as through lack of access to its infrastructure. The slogan of the disability movement, ‘nothing about us without us’, shows the extent to which things have changed – and rightly so. Yet we also still need to draw on best practice in healthcare and healing.

By the time the Church became involved in the debate there were already models, perspective and ideologies in vogue which seemed, in turn, either attractive to or in disagreement with a Christian worldview. All of them had both strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, it was too easy for Christians involved in the disability debate to start with these models, despite the fact that none of them was adequate to represent a Christian perspective.

It is not that we do not have a great deal to learn from the perspectives of others; we do. But if we do not believe

that Scripture should be our starting point for thinking about any of the great issues of the day we are in danger of losing both our distinctiveness and our authority.

The starting point, as John Naudé points out in his Introduction, is the statement which stands at the heart of the creation story that humankind is made in the image of God. Yet we cannot go back to Eden. We can only know what it means to be made in the image of God by basing our thinking on Christ who ‘is the image of the invisible God’. Christian thinking about disability is focused on Christ.

Jesus shows us what it means to be a human being. He loves those who are marginalized and has a costly passion for justice. He shows us that though suffering is something which even he, in Gethsemane, wished to avoid, it can be used by God to demonstrate his purposes for the world. He also shows us that we live in the certain hope of a new world coming where we shall all, whatever our bodies are like, be transformed in order to live in a world where there is no suffering and in which it is impossible to displease God.

In emulating Christ we learn what it is, both in our personal lives and in the life of the Church, to be people who love justice, fight alongside those who have been denied their rights and work to bring about inclusive relationships in the community. We long to be the diverse Church of which Jesus spoke, and about which others comment, ‘See how they love one another’.

Roy McCloughry

Acknowledgements: Enabling Church

We acknowledge our indebtedness to the speaking team from the very first ‘Enabling Church’ conference held in October 2010 in London, organized by Churches for All – a partnership of Christian disability organizations – and sponsored by Premier Christian Radio. Their contributions at this milestone event were the inspiration for this resource.



Introduction

Enabling is what I believe the Church should be about: enabling all people to discover God's amazing love; and enabling each person in the body of Christ to play his or her part, so the Church of Christ can function to its full potential.

Sadly, the Church has not done this in the past. But it is moving forward, especially in the way it sees the ministry, gifting and needs of disabled people. Historically, disabled people have been perceived as people 'we minister to' or as 'pew fodder', not as people who are integral to Christ's Church.

The 'Enabling Church' conference in London 2010 was an amazing event in which God brought together the speakers under one uniting banner: simply this, that disabled people are people made in the image of God. While this may seem a rather basic message, the implications are immense.

The way we value people for who they are, as they are, is so important. Disabled people still often receive the message that their disability is as a result of their sin or the sin of their parents. When we fail to see an individual with a disability as being made in the image of God, we can apply hidden pressure that he or she needs to conform to what is 'normal' in our society. This is heard so many times in the stories of disabled people who have been pressured to be healed, or who say that when God does not appear to heal it is assumed to be their fault. Perhaps they do not have enough faith or are holding on to some unconfessed sin. This has left some disabled people damaged in the way they see themselves and the way they see God.

Introduction

However, as I say, the Church is changing! The publication of this book is yet another step forward. It is an excellent resource for those who want to discover more about enabling the Church to include disabled people. It helps an individual or group grow deeper in their understanding of disability and, more importantly, form a godly perspective on those with a disability.

This is an accessible book in so many ways. The teaching is clear, biblical and engaging. The authors have used creative material to help us go deeper in our understanding, allowing us to see others and ourselves as part of God's beautiful creation – each and every individual made in God's image.

John Naudé

Author's introduction: Living interdependently

The life experience of those in the African bush is so different from that of those in Europe, as I discovered on a trip to Malawi and Uganda. I felt privileged to spend time with some of the poorest people on the planet: blind people living in remote villages, people with nothing but a few clothes, no cash and no certainty of a next meal. What struck me most, as I absorbed the painfully stark realities of African life, was the dignity of those with a living relationship with Jesus as their Saviour and Lord.

We are all made in the image of God. This is a fundamental truth, equally valid for European or African, disabled or not; although the question of whether any of us is truly ‘non-disabled’ and, if we are, whether that endures for more than a season, is up for discussion. Our understanding that we are all made in God’s image is the soil in which the dignity of humanity is rooted; not in our own achievements, nor in the approval of others – but in a relationship with our Creator God.

Some of us need to hear this afresh. The Psalmist expresses it beautifully. We are ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’, he says (Psalm 139.14). This is how God sees each one of us. He made us and loves us unconditionally. It makes no difference if we are young or old; if we see or don’t see; if we walk or don’t walk; if we hear or don’t hear; if we speak or don’t speak. It’s of no consequence to God’s love if we feel humiliated by epileptic seizures or are disfigured by the loss of a limb, or even if we can’t remember our own name because of the ravages of dementia. Our learning disability may mean our response to his love is

no more than a smile. It makes no difference. God made us and loves us, each one special and beautiful.

The biblical truth that we – every one of us – are made in the image of God was the starting point for a conference held in London in October 2010 called ‘Enabling Church – Christian theology, disability and wholeness’. I had the privilege of leading the planning of this event. It was a remarkable occasion at which almost 500 got together to think, talk and pray about the theology of disability. It was remarkable in another sense too. As speaker followed speaker, there emerged a pattern of thought that, in the view of many, cemented some important biblically rooted insights into an emerging model of disability.

Models of disability – ways of thinking about disability – have evolved and continue to evolve. They are important because they are used in shaping social policies and political agendas.

The **medical model** has been defined largely in retrospect to reflect what was actually happening before disability rights initiatives challenged long-held assumptions. In the medical model view, disabled people need either fixing (treatment) or care. This fits comfortably with the Christian virtue of compassion, but the risk is that disabled people are disempowered, made dependent and lose dignity. Others make decisions about their lives from positions of expertise and power. Sadly, in the past this has had the consequence that disabled people were put into institutions and forgotten – and this still happens in some countries.

The **social model** views so-called disabled people as those having impairments who find themselves *dis-abled* by barriers presented by social structures, the built environment and prejudiced attitudes. This model aims to give disabled people access, independence and dignity – and to put them in control of any care and support they may need

to live a fulfilling life. Of course, Christians can identify with this too, as we assert the fundamental dignity of any human being by virtue of being made in the image of God.

But this, I believe, is not the end of the story. To some extent the social model is defined in opposition to the medical model, and herein lies a danger. As 'Enabling Church' conference contributor Roy McClooughry pointed out to delegates, he lives with both models simultaneously: he welcomes the expert-led medical intervention that aims to regulate his epilepsy, but equally wishes to make choices without restriction related to his disability.

In Genesis 1.26 we read, 'Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness".' The God who made us in his image is plural: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Being imprinted with the image of God includes the divine characteristic of community. We don't function at our best when alone. We are made for relationship, designed and built for companionship and community. It's in our DNA!

Here, a word of caution. Like so many terms, 'community' is a word that has been devalued, particularly by its use in political and public policy. As a result, some disabled people have negative associations with this word. One disabled person said to me during the writing of this book: 'The *big society* seems to be a sort of abandonment without funding.' Yet, properly used, 'community' captures vital truths about relationships for all of us, throughout our lives.

The consumerist culture of the West that seems to be spreading unchecked across the globe fosters individualism and selfishness that works in opposition to that idea of community. The aim of bringing independence to those who live with disability has driven much that is good and helpful, and is to be celebrated. But there's a danger of going too far in the pursuit of independence, with the

perverse consequence that disabled people can become all the more isolated and lonely. There are times when we all need the help of those around us. This is not about weakness or failure, but about complementarity and community, about how things should be.

*The Bible affirms the dignity of all people and supports neither a strident, heroic **independency** nor an abject, passive **dependency** – but gives us wholesome pictures of **interdependency**. The gospel is intrinsically relational. As we are drawn into a relationship with our Creator we are drawn towards one another.*

No one can ‘go it alone’. We need each other. ‘No one is indispensable’ is usually said to those who bother us by their self-importance. But in the Church *everyone is indispensable*. God has gifted each to contribute in a diversity of ways, and it’s tragic when the only response of the Church to disabled people is the provision of compassion and care. Disabled people may well need the help and support of others on occasion, but that’s not the end of the story.

Within the kingdom of God there’s a place of significance for every one of us. We are all made in God’s image, and through new birth into God’s kingdom that image is being restored in us. We are imprinted with the image of a God who himself lives in community and models relationship in perfection, and he calls us to foster kingdom relationships that aspire to that quality. Only together can we be the authentic Church – Christ’s body living on earth and engaged in the crucial work of kingdom building.

That’s what this resource *Enabling Church*, is about – the search for meaningful and fruitful interdependence between all people that will make churches whole and effective, to the glory of God.

Dr Gordon Temple, CEO, Torch Trust

How to get the best out of this resource

This book is written for any church, home group or individual believing that any disabled person should be welcomed, valued and enabled to make a contribution to the work of God in his or her community. The contributors hope that you will find insights, practical ideas and encouragement – but also a strong biblical mandate for change in attitude and practice.

Although this material has a particular focus on including people who are considered disabled, the principles explored apply to any marginalized group.

Enabling Church provides you with a flexible menu of study materials, stories, personal views, discussion, worship and prayer activities suited for a wide range of churches. Leaders should choose the activities that will be most meaningful to their group and appropriate to the time available. It is not anticipated that any group would try to complete all the activities! You will note that fewer options are included for the first and last sessions. This is to allow time for the group to get to know each other a little in the first session, and to have a wide-ranging discussion in the last session about the application of the principles explored.

Seven sessions are suggested but shorter or longer courses could be constructed from the material. It could be adapted easily to fit a two-day conference, church weekend away or leaders' retreat.

No assumptions are made about levels of understanding of the Bible. The material could be followed by groups with limited or extensive Bible knowledge. Some of the activities are suitable for use in a whole-congregation context.

How to get the best out of this resource

Considering that the topic under consideration is disability, do ensure that the group is accessible (that is, that there are no obstacles to disabled people attending and participating) and that the offer of alternative formats in which this book is available (Braille, large print, audio) is made to people who may have sight loss.

Given the flexible format of the material, it's recommended that the leader has some experience of leading group discussions. The leadership role should be considered that of guide or facilitator rather than teacher, enabling and encouraging others to contribute. The leader should read the material thoroughly in advance, make an appropriate selection of activities, and ensure that any 'props' or visual aids required are provided. In most cases these are fairly simply obtained – newspapers, pens, flipchart and so on. After the first session or two, consider delegating some sections to others to lead. Sharing responsibility will strengthen the group.

All group members should have a copy of this workbook. When group members commit to reading and thinking about the material in advance, this will prove a real advantage to the ease of conversation. Members should be encouraged to bring along Bibles. Selected verses from the passages are printed but you could choose to read them in full from your own Bibles. Unless otherwise stated, the NRSV (the New Revised Standard Version) is used in this book. It may be helpful to refer to other versions, for example the popular New International Version (NIV). Those new to Bible study may find using the Contemporary English Version (CEV) good; the New Living Translation (NLT) is also recommended.

What would success look like for groups or individuals using this material? It's not about 'right' answers! It's about everyone being on a journey of discovery. If everyone has interacted in a lively and thoughtful way with:

- the Bible passage, and
- each other, free to express themselves and considerably listening to the views of others, and
- God in prayer,

then that's success!

Each section starts with one or more Bible passages, together with comments which will give a context for discussion: the **Bible briefing** and **Bible briefing notes**. This is followed by the **Disability Wall**, quotations from people with personal insights – people who are themselves disabled or closely connected with disabled people. Many of these were speakers at the first ‘Enabling Church’ conference. After this comes a range of **Discussion questions** and **Taking it further** activities. Depending on your group, you may wish to choose to sing in your session – but do select songs or hymns with values that match the values of the material.

Throughout the book are a number of reports called **Real life**, which allow disabled people to speak for themselves. Use these in the discussion times, or read one sometimes as the group comes to prayer.

Please note the different usages of the words ‘Deaf’ and ‘deaf’ in this book. ‘Deaf’, with a capital ‘D’, refers to ‘culturally deaf’ members of the Deaf community, whose first or preferred language is British Sign Language (BSL), and who view themselves primarily as a linguistic-cultural minority. The much larger number of people with a measurable hearing loss, who identify more with the language and culture of the majority hearing society, are referred to as ‘deaf’, with a small ‘d’. These are not labels externally imposed; individuals may decide for themselves which group they belong to.

