

Other Booklets Produced by the Trust

- Helpful Hints - For those who want help.
- People with Intellectual Disabilities can change YOU!
- Supporting People with Disabilities
- Communication

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(Cover Photo: Harbourside Church, Takapuna, Auckland)



CMWDT

Christian Ministries With Disabled Trust

Evangelise Equip Educate

The Blessing of Including People with Disabilities in Your Church



by Hugh Willis

(Revised by Evan Clulee & Debbie Mudgway, 2007).

The Story of a Church

Let me tell you about a small church in Auckland, New Zealand. Soon after we went there for the first time we brought one of our friends who had a disability (an amputee). Several people came and talked with us. The next week, when we took a young man (who had cerebral palsy), again several talked with him. Others were a little awkward, ill at ease, and held back, but as the weeks went by, more and more “broke the ice”.

At other churches we had attended we had asked people to assist with transport, but most we talked to had reasons (excuses?) why they couldn't help, but here it was different. Assistance didn't come all at once, but it grew over the next year. They are a caring, compassionate church, and they were blessed in their inclusion and acceptance of the people with disabilities we brought.

We asked their pastor to describe the blessing to this church.

“The blessings of such inclusion and ministry are numerous. The first is the joy that comes from obeying Christ's command. (John 14:21). As one learns to live by the Word of God, His Spirit whispers “Thank you” in one's heart, and there is no greater reward.

A second blessing is the joy of bringing joy to others. When a person, through being taken on outings with a friend no longer feels housebound, their appreciation knows no bounds. The smile of thanks which comes when a person, so often excluded, finds himself (of herself) a part of an “in-group”, is gratifying.

A third blessing is friendship. It's a wonder to discover that, physical limitation aside, people with disabilities can meet our own needs, teach us new truths, and in other ways promote growth in our lives through their personality and spiritual gifts. We discovered that ministry with disabled people is not a one-way street.

The Beatitudes for People with Disabilities

Blessed are you who take time to listen to difficult speech, for you help us to know if we persevere, we can be understood.

Blessed are you who walk with us in public places and ignore the stares of strangers, for in your companionship we find havens of relaxation.

Blessed are you who never bid us to “hurry up”, and more blessed are you who do not snatch our tasks from our hands to do them for us, for often we need time rather than help.

Blessed are you who stand behind us as we enter new and untried ventures, for our failures will be outweighed by the times when we surprise ourselves and you.

Blessed are you who ask for our help, for our greatest need is to be needed.

Blessed are you who help us with the graciousness of Christ, who did not bruise the reed or quench the flax, for often we need the help we cannot ask for.

Blessed are you when by all these things you ensure that the thing that makes us individuals is not our peculiar muscles, nor our wounded nervous system, nor our difficulties in learning, but in the God-given self which no impairment can confine.

Be *Blessed* and be exceedingly glad and know that you have given us reassurance that could never be spoken in words, for you accept us as Christ accepts all His own children.

I found their reactions quite difficult to cope with at first, especially when I was still hurting. Some appeared aloof and uncaring, others over-emotional. I still find it difficult when meeting old friends again that I have not seen since my hospitalisation. I sense their shock and sadness, yet I know that I have moved on from that position myself. Pity is hard to handle, and unhelpful.

It is hard for an independent person, such as I was, to have to learn to depend on others – to receive help graciously, to learn to ask for assistance when you need it, and yet not to become over demanding or ungrateful.

I am so indebted to my family and a whole range of health professionals and community agencies for their continued support. I am also grateful for the prayers of the church fellowship that have been an encouragement to my patience and faith.

I have experienced God's all sufficient grace. It has come in daily portions and in a personal way that is unique to me. God never allows any life experience to be wasted. Each such experience joins with past experiences to prepare us for the next experience. And through it all I have known His strength which comes to perfection where there is weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)."

Miriam Curran

Another rather unexpected blessing is, as a pastor, I've seen the visitors to our church respond positively to the sight of people with disabilities being accepted and included within our fellowship. As they saw love expressed in practical ways, the visitors gained a clear impression of our church's priorities and the commitment of its people. Some who were initially hesitant about approaching people with disabilities, grew bolder as they saw others like themselves interacting with them. Our fellowship has grown a lot as a result, both spiritually and numerically."

Why Aren't There More People with Disabilities In Our Churches?

There are many reasons why people with disabilities may not be in our churches, here are some: -

- They may never have been invited to church.
- They may not be able to access the church – both because of transport issues, and physical access into the building.
- They may not feel welcomed and included in services and in the life of the church.
- They may have attended church once, but don't anymore because someone has said something insensitive.
- The congregation's attitude might be wrong towards disabled people, i.e. patronising, or simply misunderstanding, or not wanting to understand.

There are many other reasons, but one that does not apply is that there are no people with disabilities in any given community within reach of a local church.

Disabled People are in Your Community

The 2001 Census on Population & Dwellings showed that nearly 20% of people in New Zealand, have some long term disability that affects their normal daily living. This equates to over 760,000 people.

This is a large population group, therefore you will find disabled people in every walk of life, in every strata of society, and in every community. *How many people with disabilities do we see in our churches? How many people with disabilities are there in your church?*

Objective nine of the New Zealand Disability Strategy states: *'Support lifestyle choices, recreation and culture for disabled people.'* This is about disabled people having the opportunity to participate fully in their local communities. Part of this is involvement in their church. People with disabilities may need support from their church, in so they can be fully involved there, and in their community.

Disability Awareness Services

Taking Disability Awareness church services gives us a good look at a large cross section of churches. In Auckland we have visited over 100 churches, covering most denominations. We have found few disabled people in these churches. Does this mean that people with disabilities will not go to church? The answer is an emphatic "No!"

There are churches that accept and include people with disabilities fully within the life of the church, and as a result disabled people attend. Two examples of Auckland churches that are inclusive and welcoming are Harbourside Church (Takapuna) and Church of the Saviour (Anglican) (Blockhouse Bay).

The Challenges of Adjusting to Having a Disability

Miriam has had the personal experience of adjusting to having a disability — she writes...

"Remember that each person is an individual who wants to be treated as such. The assistance offered must be uniquely fitted to that person's physical and spiritual needs. I found that the impairment which put me in a wheelchair involved much more than adjusting to the fact that I could no longer walk unaided. There was a major grief process to be worked through.

In fact, it was a series of minor griefs to be dealt with through loss of job, loss of income, loss of intellectual stimulation of working in a chosen vocation with respected colleagues, loss of routine – all on top of the loss of mobility and inability to manage even simple housework or attend to personal needs.

Grief has its stages and, as in any bereavement, I found that numbness, frustration, anger, depression etc, were feelings that surfaced, boiled over and had to be expressed. Gradually there comes the full acceptance of the situation and its implications.

For the Christian there is a wonderful peace that comes with the realisation that God makes all things work together for good for those who love Him (Romans 8:28-29). This grief process is not confined to the disabled person. We are surrounded by friends and family members. Each of my children, my husband, my closest friends and relatives, had to come to that stage of acceptance too; each grieved over the changed roles and experienced some of the same reactions.

Other Ways your Church can Minister

If there are people with intellectual disabilities in your church, or in your community, you could consider starting a ministry that specifically meets their spiritual needs. You would find it helpful to read the CMWDT booklet: "People with Intellectual Disabilities can change YOU." and by talking with the people who run "Joy Ministries", a ministry of the CMWDT for advice on how to start a group.

For the benefit of those who find it difficult to get out of their home, or for congregation members who are unwell, you could arrange that audio visual material such as tapes/ CD's/ videos/ DVD's of church services be copied, and delivered to people's homes, so they can be blessed by the teaching.

You could seek a team of people who would be prepared to visit rest homes, meet with the residents, and provide something that will bless them – conversation, music, singing, Bible reading, activities...

Fostering children with disabilities, is another way some of your church members could be a further blessing to disabled people and families in your community.

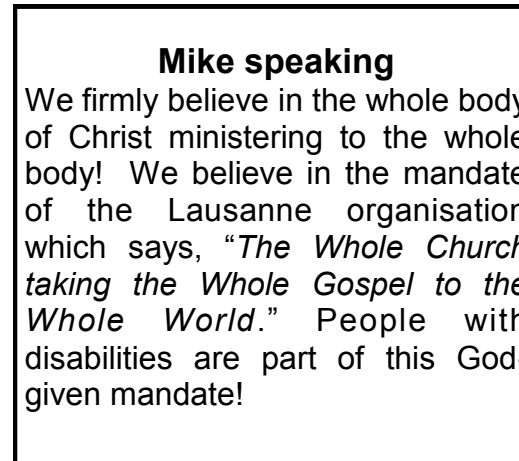
Understanding People with Disabilities

It is so important to listen carefully to what people with disabilities say. Value their opinions. Do not assume that you know what is best. . Attending a CMWDT seminar is helpful, but nothing beats spending time with a disabled person, finding out what is important to them, and what their heart concerns are. There is no substitute for first hand experience!



David preaching

We strongly encourage all people with disabilities to use their God-given giftings, and at the same time educate the church to encourage full and equal participation of all people in the body of Christ.



Mike speaking

We firmly believe in the whole body of Christ ministering to the whole body! We believe in the mandate of the Lausanne organisation which says, "*The Whole Church taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World.*" People with disabilities are part of this God-given mandate!



Michael evangelising

We encourage all Christians to be part of God's mandate in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others. People with disabilities are not exempt from this responsibility.

Making Your Church Welcoming to People with Disabilities

There are three necessary factors here: -

1. The church leadership (pastor/ minister, elders) need to value people with disabilities, and see them as people created in God's image (Genesis 1:27), and desire to fully accept and include all people in their congregation.
2. The congregation needs to show the same accepting attitude; they are inclusive of all people with disabilities, and are willing to be taught how best to support.
3. The church values people with disabilities, by removing the attitudinal, structural, and communication barriers that prevent them from attending, thereby making the church accessible to all.

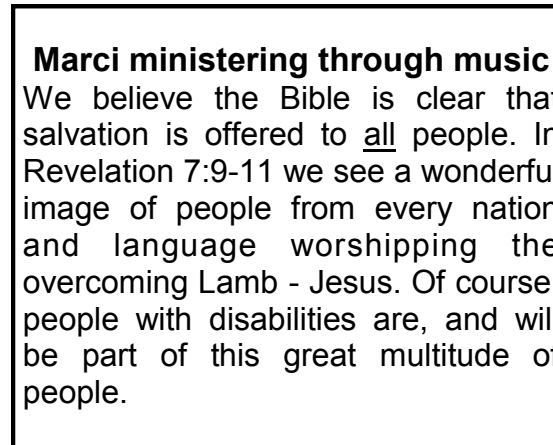
How to Start Implementing a Concern for People With Disabilities

A good beginning is to invite a Disability Awareness team to lead a service in your church. Church leaders would find it helpful to read the booklet CMWDT has produced, "Everybody Welcome? A Guide on How to Make Your Church Disability Friendly." This book has opened the eyes of many to value inclusion of people with disabilities. The Disability Awareness Services are well accepted and eye opening, and have been a humbling experience. This could pave the way for a strong nucleus of interested people to help your church make a start towards fully including people with disabilities. After such a service you may want to meet with those in your congregation who are interested in reaching out to people with disabilities in your community.



Immanuel sharing his testimony

We believe God's spirit can and does work through all people, and that all Christians have a voice, and should be given opportunities to speak to and therefore build up the wider body of Christ. Immanuel is one such person with much to teach us.



Marci ministering through music

We believe the Bible is clear that salvation is offered to all people. In Revelation 7:9-11 we see a wonderful image of people from every nation and language worshipping the overcoming Lamb - Jesus. Of course, people with disabilities are, and will be part of this great multitude of people.



Disabled people praying

We value prayer. All Christians should be encouraged to play their part in building up the whole body of Christ through prayer. God understands all people regardless of language, or speech impediment.

How Can People with Disabilities Contribute to Your Church?

Attending church services is only one part of the full involvement with the church family. People with disabilities have the same types of God given giftings and motivations as able bodied members of your congregation. First you need to find out what are the giftings and motivations of the disabled people in your congregation.

Here are a few ideas on how a person with a disability could contribute to your church : -

- Speak to the church and educate church members in disability awareness, and faith lessons from their own experiences. Even if people cannot speak well they can write, or communicate through a computer and these could be read out in a service.
- Be part of a phoning ministry of support and encouragement, or provide a “listening ear”.
- Be part of the worship team, in items, the church concert or as a member of a church group.
- Practically serve (i.e. in the kitchen with making morning tea after the service).
- Participate and/or lead intercession and prayer. Some may like to know of prayer requests in the church family.

There are many other areas in which people with disabilities could contribute and serve the church. The key thing is to find out what a particular individual would like to do. It must be their choice, and could be initiated by them, with support, the church will be blessed as a result.

Overcoming Physical Barriers

First, audit your church to determine how disability friendly it really is (See “Auditing the Church” in “Everybody Welcome?” – this looks at structures, communication and attitudes). Walk around the whole premises inside and out, and as you do, note down anything you see that could possibly be a barrier to a person with a disability - from the car park, the entrance, the foyer, the auditorium, bathrooms, fellowship hall, pastor’s office, and other rooms frequently used for meetings. Ask a disabled person in the congregation to go with you when you do the audit.

If you are planning a new church, or alterations to existing buildings, ensure that your building committee is aware of the Standards New Zealand NZS4121:2001, “*New Zealand Standards for Design for Access and Mobility – Buildings and Associated Facilities.*” This is available online, and also through your Public Library. (See www.standards.co.nz).



Provide at least a couple of places in your car park, close to the entrance, that are reserved at all times for use by people with disabilities, and ensure a ramp or curb-cut is in, if there is a curb between the car park and the church.

A ramped access into your main church entrance is a must. Steps as the only access are a barrier. Ramps do involve some expense, but how important is it to value all people? Remember, a ramp benefits many people, not just those people who use a wheelchair, but also the elderly, young parents with pushchairs, and other people with mobility challenges. The ramp must be the correct gradient, and ensure a handrail is installed down the side of any ramp or set of steps on your church property. (See NZS4121:2001).

There needs to be a fully accessible bathroom that people with disabilities can access. Remember aspects such as:
Are the doors into the toilet easy to open? (Not heavy doors), Do they open outwards?
Are the doorways wide enough for the wheelchair to negotiate?
Is there room to manoeuvre the chair once inside?
Ask a disabled person to recommend changes before going ahead with building alterations.
(See NZS4121:2001).



Install a loop system in your church for the hearing-impaired. This will allow those with hearing aids to tune in to “T”, and they will be able to hear, and participate in the services.

How To Get Your Congregation Involved

Find out where people with disabilities live. Are there supported living homes in your community? Advertise in your bulletin if any congregation member knows of any disabled people who may like to come to church. Find out ways of getting disabled people to church. As the number grows a roster system for transport will be necessary. Encourage new church members to serve, and share the joy of the responsibility.

Encourage your congregation members to attend a Disability Awareness Seminar at the CMWDT headquarters (if your church is in or near Auckland). You could arrange a ½ or 1 day seminar for a group of churches in your community. Liaise with the CMWDT, we may be able to provide training, or resources and advice to run your own seminar. Please contact the head office for more information.

Invite a disabled person to speak to different interest groups in your church – youth group, missions group etc...

Are there families with children with disabilities in your church? It is often difficult for such parents to find baby sitters, but they would be blessed by an evening out occasionally. Find people who would be prepared to be involved and assist in this way.

Display on your church’s newsletters stand, or notice board, a selection of the CMWDT publications. (E.g. “The Encourager” magazine, and “Everybody Welcome?”).

Once you know of people with disabilities in your neighbourhood, find a few people to organise a practical outreach – to do gardening, minor maintenance repair jobs, painting, washing windows, etc