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***Desert island books***

Ernest Lucas

***Special issue on disability***

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**the baptist ministers'  
journal**



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# ***From the editor***

## *Disability matters*

This issue of *bmj* focuses on various aspects of disability. Currently there is a surge of interest in disability studies, both social and theological, and our churches are becoming more aware that they are expected to make good provision for those who have difficulty with access in any way at all. Sadly the church is not always the pioneering model of best practice that we might hope—usually because members are simply not aware of the issues.

About three years ago the Disability Justice Group of the BU was founded and its work is developing. Several members of the DJG write in this issue of *bmj*, but there are also contributions from other authors, giving us an insight into the practical difficulties of some of our brothers and sisters in Christ. All this matters because we are committed to justice as a core value of our denomination. Our churches are at their best when they embrace a variety of contributions and tackle challenges with a good spirit so that all can sit round the King's table as equals.

I am asking questions of my own church—which actually is quite an 'enabling' community. Even so, we should question ourselves. Too many words? Too many songs? Too much organisation? Too much Sunday focus? We can be more than this, and do better. The image of the Great Banquet, where the invited guests rudely stayed away and the 'nobodies' enjoyed the bounty—without being healed, washed or dressed up—is a wonderful image for all that we do in our communities. I hope this issue will help you in your own church discussions about inclusion.

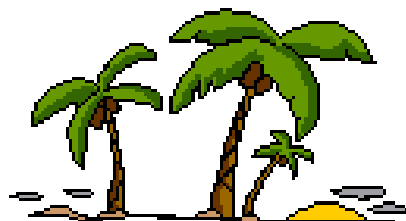
We also feature one of our popular *Desert island books* articles, by Ernest Lucas. I do hope you enjoy reading it.

Finally, Nigel Howarth has just stood down after being *bmj*'s distributor for several years. Nigel has been a great colleague and I know you will join me in thanking him.

I look forward to hearing from you if you have an issue to raise, or good practice to share, with colleagues through *bmj*. SN

***If you would like to submit an article, or comment on one you have read, please contact the editor.***

## Ernest Lucas' *Desert island books*



'Choose three books, one of which must be theological'. What a hard choice for a near life-long bibliophile! When I was at primary school most of my friends spent Saturday mornings at the children's matinees at the local cinemas. I and my sisters didn't, because our parents couldn't afford it. I guess that my father's salary as an Army Scripture Reader was rather less than that of a Baptist minister. Instead, most Saturday mornings we walked to the local library and returned with our allowed quota of books. Ever since, wherever I have lived in the UK (at least 12 different places), I have joined and used the local library. One of the joys of retirement is having a lot more time to read outside the requirements of the job.

So, how to make the choice? I decided they had to be 'meaty' books which would repay several readings and that they should be related to long-term interests. Even so, the choice changed every time I sat down to make it. At the moment...I'll begin with a novel. At about 1400 pages it is one of the longest novels ever published as a single volume in English: *A suitable boy*, by Vikram Seth (Harper Collins, 1993). It is a love story set in the country of my birth, India, in the early 1950s. It is a complex tale, divided into 19 parts, following the lives of four families over 18 months as Mrs Rupa Methra searches for a suitable boy to marry her 19-year-old daughter Lata.

The prose is elegant and the characterisation vivid. There are wonderful portrayals of India and some of its landmarks. It opens windows on various worlds within India—those of the ordinary worker, the politician, of religion. A number of issues facing the newly independent country are covered—Hindu-Moslem tensions, land reform, abolition of the Zamindar tax-collection system, the empowerment of Moslem women. There is irony and satire but the book is mainly descriptive and evocative with little ideological edge. If it has a main theme it is that of the relationship between love and passion, especially with regard to what will make the

basis of a successful marriage. Both Lata and her eventual husband have to make choices about the kind of love relationship they want in the long run.

Many western readers have expressed surprise, even disappointment that, in the end, as one reviewer put it, Lata chooses 'a nice boy over a gorgeous boy'. Haresh eventually chooses not to challenge religious and communal boundaries in his choice of a wife. In the church we talk about the importance of developing strong communities but the western mind-set finds it hard to put fitting into the community before satisfying individual desires. But maybe for Lata and Haresh there is a strong personal desire to remain an integral part of their community. Is this evidence of maturity or of stifled personalities? While reading this book you travel through life with its superbly presented characters and at the end I felt a sense of bereavement in having to leave them.

I was born in Bangalore, India, because of the fairly common combination of missionary and military. My mother was a member of an Anglo-Indian family that served as missionaries in India for four generations from 1836. My father, a farmhand in Kent, joined the army in his mid-teens when his own father returned from fighting in Gallipoli and France and committed suicide, no doubt the result of post-traumatic stress, leaving a widow and eight children. As the only wage-earner my father decided that the army would feed him and clothe him and that if he sent home most of his wages his family would be better off than on his farmhand's wages. When his regiment went to India he transferred into the Indian Army and stayed there for 22 years, until India became independent. There he became a Christian and met my mother.

When aged about nine I had a serious tropical disease, apparently a consequence of my Indian origins. I might not have survived if our GP hadn't had the humility to accept my mother's diagnosis of the disease and advice about what medication to prescribe. During my lengthy convalescence my brother, who is 13 years older than me, allowed me access to his bookcase. I read an introductory book on astronomy and was immediately hooked on the subject. I pursued it on my subsequent library visits. In time my main scientific focus shifted to biochemistry, but I've retained an interest in astronomy. Excellent history teachers in my grammar school inspired an enduring interest in that subject. Both interests are combined in my second book choice, *Kepler* by Max Casper (Dover, 1993). This version is a corrected and expanded version of the 1959 edition.

Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) is often called 'the father of modern astronomy' because of his discovery and formulation of the three laws of planetary motion. These laws were based purely on observational evidence, largely gathered by the

great Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, who employed Kepler as his assistant because of his mathematical ability. It was left to Newton to provide the theoretical under-pinning of these laws with his discovery of the law of gravity and his three laws of motion.

Kepler was a devout protestant Christian and his life, and that of his family, was deeply affected by the tragedy of the Thirty Years' War which was fuelled by religious tensions among the Germanic states. Casper's masterly biography provides a very good picture of the social, political and religious background to Kepler's life. His account of Kepler's life is full of fascinating detail. He has a deep and sympathetic understanding of Kepler as a person and not just as a mathematician and astronomer. There are detailed discussions of his scholarly work and publications as Caspar seeks to take the reader through Kepler's unfolding thought processes and understanding.

Some might find this detail off-putting, but it is one reason why I think the book would be a good companion to have on a desert island. There is plenty here to exercise a scientifically inclined mind. Kepler's Christian beliefs and spirituality shine through his scientific writing. For over five years he wrestled with the problem of the correct geometric shape to fit the observational evidence for the orbit of Mars. It clearly wasn't, as was generally assumed on Aristotle's authority, a circle. After doing at least 70 separate and difficult calculations he hit on the answer—it is an ellipse.

In his book, *Harmonice mundi*, Kepler explains what motivated him to keep working at the problem and not give up. It was the belief that, 'Geometry existed before the creation, is co-eternal with the mind of God...geometry provided God with a model for the creation and was implanted into man, together with God's own likeness - and not merely converged to his mind through the eyes'. If one replaces 'geometry' here by 'wisdom' it is clear that Kepler had Proverbs 8 and Genesis 1 in mind as he wrote this. Also, he was prepared to follow the evidence against the prevailing opinion because he regarded himself as 'a high priest in the book of nature, religiously bound to alter not one jot or tittle of what it had pleased God to write in it'. He saw science as a Christian, spiritual enterprise, 'God wanted to have us recognize these laws when He created us in His image, so that we should share in His own thoughts'.

My third book reflects my interest in understanding the Bible, something learned from childhood family Bible reading and prayer and my upbringing in the Christian Brethren. It is *The language and imagery of the Bible* by G.B. Caird (Duckworth, 1980). It is one of the few theological/biblical studies books that I have read more-

or-less at one sitting. Caird was one of the early biblical scholars to apply the insights of modern semantics to understanding the Bible, and the book is based on a lecture course I heard him deliver when I was a student at Regent's Park College. His lectures were riveting, and so is the book. It is full of illuminating discussions of the application of insights from semantics to biblical texts and passages. I gain new insights almost every time I dip into the book again. For me, any theology worth having must be grounded in the Bible and so understanding and interpreting it well is crucial. Hence I offer this as my theological book.

Apparently I am allowed one luxury, besides the Bible and Shakespeare. That, too, is a difficult choice. Maybe it should be a solar-powered chocolate fountain to complement all the fresh fruit growing on the desert island. After all, chocolate is not a food but a luxury. Or perhaps it should be an astronomical telescope to benefit from the dark nights without the sky glow from modern conurbations that is the bane of amateur astronomers in much of the world today. I promise not to use the lenses and mirrors to start fires, so it will be only a luxury. I'm torn between the two. Perhaps today I'll opt for the chocolate fountain.

***Ernest Lucas was a research biochemist before studying theology and being ordained as a Baptist minister. He is now Vice-Principal Emeritus, Bristol Baptist College and an Honorary Research Fellow in Theology and Religious Studies, Bristol University. His wife, Hazel, was a secondary school physics teacher. They have two married sons and three grandchildren.***

## Book reviews

We are always looking out for new contributors to *bmj*'s book review pages. Maybe you would like to review—or know someone who would.

If you would like to know more, please contact John Goddard, our Review Editor. John would like to know what areas you might be interested in.



# The language of disability

by Martin Hobgen

In recent years people have come to recognise that the language used to discuss issues of race and gender is very important when addressing discriminatory attitudes and behaviour. The same applies to language of disability, since it powerfully affects how people with disabilities see themselves, and how they are seen by others. Sadly the church has lagged behind wider society in addressing issues of disability.<sup>1</sup>

As a wheelchair user who is married, well educated and ordained, I am used to two common ways of people addressing or referring to me. I not infrequently get mistaken for other people, along the lines of ‘You’re Joe aren’t you?’—probably arising from the person in question knowing one wheelchair user and assuming I must be their friend/acquaintance. This confusion might indicate that for them the wheelchair is the significant identifier of a disabled person’s identity. Sometimes I find myself being talked about in the third person, where someone addresses my companion (often my wife) with ‘Did he enjoy...?’ referring to some activity or event I have attended or participated in. Recently, while walking through a riverside park, deep in conversation with my wife and two friends, a lady interrupted us, gesticulated in my direction and asked ‘Is that Joe?’ almost as if I wasn’t even present. We were left so stunned by this blatant objectification that we said ‘No!’ in unison and continued our walk.

There are myriad terms that have been, and are, used to define what is meant by disability. Although there is no clear agreement on contemporary use there is general agreement that many traditional terms are no longer acceptable. Such unacceptable terms include, but are not limited to, ‘handicapped’, ‘spastic’, ‘cripple’, ‘dumb’ and ‘invalid’. Broad generalisations such as ‘the disabled’ which are considered pejorative should also be avoided, as should language such as ‘victim’, ‘sufferer’ and describing wheelchair users as ‘confined to a wheelchair’.<sup>2</sup> Although apparently a negative term, ‘impairment’ is widely used to refer to the physical, emotional or mental conditions which give rise to a disabled person’s experience of being different and disabled by society.

Debate continues about the use of ‘disabled person’ *versus* ‘person with disabilities’ and no consensus has been reached. Within a social model of disability the latter term is rejected because it infers that the disability is attached to the person and not a result of societal discrimination,<sup>3</sup> although there are some in favour of this form of language.<sup>4</sup> Others suggest that the debate about language and its impact is more important than the outcome.<sup>5</sup> Generally there is agreement that references should be as accurate as possible, such as ‘wheelchair user’ rather than ‘physically disabled’. The term ‘impairment’ is used

within a social model to specify the physical or mental attributes of an individual that give rise to social attitudes that cause ‘disability’.

One group of people agreed on language usage is the Deaf community. Someone who has a hearing impairment is referred to as ‘Deaf’ (with capital D) to reflect the cultural context of Deaf society. Most Deaf people refuse to see themselves as disabled, reflecting their view that Deaf society, with its own languages and culture, is a valid minority linguistic group within wider society. It should be noted that many people who lose significant levels of hearing because of age are not included within the Deaf community and usually do not identify themselves as disabled, reminding us that our concern should be broader than those who are easily identified as disabled.

The term ‘able bodied’ is widely used to refer to anyone without an evident impairment. Because this term creates implicit assumptions about normality (when referring to people who do not experience disability) the term ‘non-disabled’ has been coined. Another term that has gained currency recently is ‘abled’, reflecting how society’s attitudes and prejudices enable those without impairments, while disabling those with impairments.

Some of the language that creates barriers between disabled and non-disabled people within our church communities is unconscious.<sup>6</sup> In churches the invitation ‘please stand’ to sing, or to signify a response to God, excludes those who would like to stand but are unable to, or have sensed God speak to them but cannot signify this by standing up. The invitation ‘please stand if you are able to’ is far more inclusive and implicitly allows those who can stand but tire easily, to sit when they desire. When inviting people to signify a response to God an invite to raise a hand or to look at the speaker would be far more inclusive.

### **Language that divides or unites**

The debate about ‘disability language’ must not be confined simply to language that directly defines disability. Language that is used to define or describe the context for understanding and addressing issues of disability is a powerful way to shape understanding and action.

One such debate is around the understanding of ‘inclusion’ or ‘integration’, which can be helpfully illustrated by the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics.

The Paralympics is an example of the integration of disabled people into world class sport. A completely separate and parallel Olympic games is set up for disabled people, who, while competing at an extremely high level, are separated from the mainstream Games. For full inclusion to occur, disabled people need to be free to compete alongside non-disabled people—if not in the same races and events, then at least in a

smoothly integrated event. To some extent at London 2012 this did happen, with some disabled athletes competing in the July Olympic Games and later in the Paralympics.

The move from exclusion to integration and then full inclusion can be hindered or assisted by the language used in the media, by politicians, business leaders and others whose voices are listened to by the majority non-disabled general public. Such language can be categorised as overtly negative, overtly heroic, or acceptance.

**Negative.** In our current economic crisis much emphasis has been placed on reducing the number of people on state benefits. A recent report by Scope, the disability charity previously known as the Spastic Society, has shown that disabled people have become a focus of this debate. No doubt the abuse of disability benefits exists, but disabled people as a whole have been portrayed negatively by politicians and many in the media.<sup>7</sup> The frequent image of disabled people who suffer or are afflicted by their impairment strengthens the negative image of disability. Wheelchair users are frequently understood as being 'confined/restricted to a wheelchair', rather than as using a wheelchair to provide them with the means of living fulfilled lives. Within the medical profession, disabled people have for too long been seen as patients who need to be made well or made normal, or who are described by their medical condition and therefore objectified. When a disabled person cannot be healed or normalised, s/he may be assessed as living a worthless life.

**Heroic.** At the other end of the scale some disabled people are held up as courageous heroes for overcoming their disability to lead 'normal' lives. Dame Tanni Grey Thompson is often described in heroic terms and as being of great courage for overcoming her disability to take part successfully in several Paralympics. While there is an element of truth to this, she has simply faced the same challenges as other non-disabled athletes competing at a similar world-class level, but in a different way.

**Acceptance.** One of the biggest shifts in the language of disability in the past 20 years has been the change in whose voices have been heard. Historically non-disabled people, mostly in the medical and caring professions, have been the authoritative voices on all matters concerning disabled people. Through their own strand of the civil rights movement disabled people have increasingly found their voices and made their views known on matters that affect them.<sup>8</sup> Having found their voice, there is a greater possibility that disabled people will be accepted not as victims or heroes but as equal participants in our increasingly diverse society.<sup>9</sup>

As a wheelchair user I am sometimes challenged when I say that 'I walk to the shops', by people who insist that I should say 'I wheel to the shops'. While the latter is technically correct, it is an example of language that divides disabled and non-disabled people. In the same way a blind colleague will say 'I see what you mean' rather than avoiding the verb 'to see'. I will use specific language at other times, such as asking 'for a push' when I need assistance with slopes or distance. Where possible, language that unites disabled

and non-disabled people should be used, while specific language relating to impairment and its effects, should be used when it is necessary for clarity in specific situations.

While language is very important we must remember that tone of voice, body language etc may speak more loudly than the words we use. Actions that embrace disabled people, and the change of attitudes are vital in communicating acceptance to those against whom wider society often discriminates, and the church has historically excluded or patronised.

There is a risk that once the church has understood the importance of the language used to understand disability (as it has begun to do with respect to race and gender), that nothing more will happen. Another inadequate alternative is that the church could make all sorts of practical changes to enable disabled people to attend, without altering the language and accompanying attitudes.

Although language is an important element of breaking down the 'them/us' divide between disabled and non-disabled people, full inclusion in all areas of church life will only be achieved when disabled people are seen and treated as fellow sons and daughters of Christ.

***Martin Hobgen is a Baptist minister currently doing doctoral research into the relationship between disability and participation in Baptist churches at NBLC.***

#### **Notes to text**

1. C. J. Kudlick, *Disability history: why we need another 'other'*, in *The American Historical Review*, 2003, **108**(3), 763-793.
2. C. Barnes, *Disability, cultural representation and language*, in *Critical Public Health*, 2003, **6**(2), 9-20.
3. Barnes, p 17.
4. C. D. Fernald, *When in London...: Differences in disability language preferences among English-speaking countries*, in *Mental Retardation*, 1995, **33**(2), 99-103.
5. M. Bérubé, Term paper. *Profession*, 2010(1), 112-116; P. Koppers, Introduction. *Profession*, 2010(1),
6. C. A. Satterlee, 'The eye made blind by sin', in *Liturgy*, 2009, **25**(2), 33-41.
7. K. Garthwaite, 'The language of shirkers and scroungers?' in *Disability & Society*, 2011, **26**(3), 369-372.
8. N. L. Eiesland, *The disabled God : towards a liberatory theology of disability*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994.
9. For example, the 17/6/2014 BBC Radio 4 Today programme and article on the best way to support disabled people, whether in small community locations or larger residential accommodation, included the voices of disabled residents in the debate as well as the non-disabled leader of SCOPE, a charity supporting those with cerebral palsy.

# Disability and ministry formation

by David Beech

**A**s I write this article I do so with a somewhat amusing, yet slightly unnerving news story playing in my mind. Have you heard the one about the pilot whose prosthetic arm became detached as he was landing a plane? We are usually only told about these incidents long after they happened, perhaps wisely. I will return to this story later.

What happens when we sense the call of God to change direction, pursue a new challenge or enter a new chapter? It happens for many of us on a regular basis and we implement those things without a great deal of upheaval to our lives. Sometimes though, the call of God may lead to a more radical, fundamental change. This happened for me 10 years ago, having spent 18 years in local government. I clearly yet unexpectedly felt the call to ministry. It both excited me and terrified me.

I had long believed that I would enter full-time Christian service and, having spent a number of years in lay leadership roles within my local church, ministry could have appeared to be the next logical step. Once I began to sense that call I started to wonder whether this what God had spoken to me about all those years ago. I tested the call by sharing it with a few people and it seemed to be affirmed.

The prospect also terrified me. Having left school 20 years earlier with no qualifications, I was daunted by the prospect of going back to study. The other reason for my hesitation was my physical disability. Do people 'like me' become ministers? Did I fit the profile of a ministerial candidate? Would I even be considered? We were both in well paid jobs, had moved into a lovely home and were quite settled. So I did my best to ignore this sense of calling and carry on with my life.

Five years later and these ideas about ministry had not disappeared, but rather been forgotten about. Once I began to be specifically challenged about it for a second time I decided to explore the call further with my regional minister. 'It just doesn't go away' is something I remember saying to him when we met. So began the journey through ministerial recognition committee, college interviews and on into ministerial formation. As I offer some thoughts from this journey, I need to also state that I can only speak from my own experience and perspective and that these thoughts are not meant to be in any stereotypical.

**Ministerial recognition interview.** Having been assessed in the pulpit by a member of the ministerial recognition committee I was invited by the association for interview. It was a largely positive experience and the staff and panel were keen to ensure my disability was not a barrier. I do recall being asked a question about how I thought my disability could affect my ability to be a minister. While I was not personally perturbed by the question, I was conscious that it was not the sort of question I would expect to be asked at an interview.

Accepting that ministry is not like a job in the same sense that my roles in local government were jobs, I have reflected on this point. In many areas of recruitment, this question would not have arisen. In my case I had already spent months of personal reflection weighing up the call in relation to my disability.

**College interview.** I remember my two-day college interview at Northern Baptist Learning Community very clearly. Having previously visited the college it was obvious that the premises were accessible for my particular needs and that using my wheelchair around the site would not cause any real difficulty. I was asked to do nothing that I felt I could not fully participate in and was fully integrated into the group and the interview process. I received a very warm welcome and felt accepted and included by all the staff. In no way did I detect being singled out for special treatment or attention.

**Church placement.** The church was told that their new minister in training was someone with a physical disability. I have never once detected from anyone any particular disquiet about my mobility issues. In fact it is fair to say that I have received what only can be described as a warm welcome from everybody.

There is a phrase used in the world of work these days about employers being expected to make 'reasonable adjustments' for employees with physical disabilities. During my first week at the church I met with the deacons to discuss any such adjustments that might be needed for me to perform my duties effectively. The only real adjustment needed at that stage was that I had been in the habit of using a breakfast bar stool from which to preach. This has become a semi-permanent fixture at the pulpit and I now also use a stool from which to lead communion.

We have needed adjustments at the manse also, but never has my disability caused a problem with my congregation or my ability to minister. The fact that I have now been called to become the full-time minister is testament to the fact their main concern appears to be whether or not I am a good minister. Surely this is how it should be.

**College life.** So what about ministerial formation itself? There are always tensions about balancing church work and study, but that is no different for any of the colleagues I have had the pleasure of studying with.

Academically I quickly realised that I was managing workloads and maintaining the standard of work that was expected. This meant that for me there was never any question of additional support being required, even though I knew it was available. Only twice did I have to formally request extensions to submission dates for pieces of work due to ill health. That said, extensions were granted to a variety of people and for a variety of reasons. Even people without disabilities get ill.

During my time at college I have perhaps only twice been disappointed that I was asked to sit out activities that had been arranged in group sessions because I may have found them 'difficult', and I admit to having found this disappointing. Hospitality and welcome seem to me to be a central theme in the gospels and maybe these activities will be restructured or thought through in different ways to be more inclusive. Apart from these two instances my physical disability has never been an issue. This is great credit to the staff and students, past and present, at the college, who often enough seemed to make sure that I took my turn in being included in a variety of ways in college life, playing a full and active role.

There are the usual questions about whether there are enough disabled parking spaces and adequate toilet facilities for those with disabilities, but this comment would be levelled at any number of locations up and down the country. Still, I believe this to be something that Christian organisations should take seriously.

One observation I did make at my final college review in the early summer was that part of the process of ministerial formation included courses on gender and racism awareness but nothing on disability awareness. As a member of the Baptist Union Disability Justice Group I am bound to say this seemed odd. Going back to my earlier comment about hospitality and welcome, and given that most of our churches have a number of people with a variety of disabilities or age-related conditions, I think ministerial candidates must be encouraged to think about disability issues in the context of church life during their formation.

### **Theological reflection**

To this point I have offered personal experiences and reflections, and I now want to offer some theological reflection. Fundamental to my understanding of how anyone gets recommended for ministry, is that initial sense of calling to serve God. This call is of course a personal matter and, while it is imperative that the calling should be tested, what occurs in the heart of any individual to get them to this point is to do with the stirrings and promptings of the Holy Spirit. It goes without saying that anybody who makes application for ministry ought to be treated with dignity, sensitivity and respect as the calling is tested.

As I remember, as well as the call being tested, another part of preparation for

ministerial formation is the need to assess someone's ability to learn. So those who satisfactorily demonstrate an appropriate call and an ability to learn are likely to be accepted for formation. For Baptists this means those from different backgrounds regardless of race, gender or disability, which is consistent with the teaching of scripture. 1 Corinthians 12:12–31 speaks of the body (the church) being made up of different parts. No parameters are given to exclude those with particular God-given gifts being called to various acts of service within the life of the church, including ministry. I am reminded of Peter justifying in Jerusalem his actions at Cornelius' house, after realising that God makes no distinction. Acts 10:34-35 says, 'Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him".' This is a good model for those exploring their gifts.

While reiterating that any call to ministry must be tested, and selection and formation definitely does that, we have a clear mandate from scripture to take care not to exclude.

I have already alluded to the fact that Jesus' ministry was often about tackling prejudices and preconceptions, and as ministers of God's word we have a responsibility to do the same, in our own lives and attitudes, in the church and in wider society.

### **Concluding thoughts**

I am glad that the 'people like me are not suitable for ministry' mindset did not overrule me. I am delighted that I kept hearing that call and, with the encouragement and validation of those around me, that I came forward for ministry.

Of course in an ideal world, we would not need to write or read articles like this. However, I do feel there is probably still work to be done so that those actively or passively marginalised by society are given level access to explore their gifts and callings in the life of the church—including ministry. The Baptist Union has a good recent history in making the possibility of ministry open to all. Yet I challenge and encourage us all to continue to make those opportunities as smooth and accessible as they can be.

As I consider briefly again the incident of the pilot, I think of some potentially catastrophic consequences. Gladly, nothing untoward happened. My disability has never led to any catastrophic consequences in ministry—neither would it or should it. There continue to be many challenges and perhaps some of those challenges are particular to me and my physical disability. With a good team around me we will continue to work them through and look forward to being the best minister I can be.

***David Beech is minister at Scarisbrick New Road Baptist Church, Southport.***



# Deaf church

by Susan Myatt

I was born profoundly deaf. I knew from an early age that God existed, but I had a long and difficult journey to come to faith in him. Generally people assume that if there is an interpreter, the Deaf have no further needs, but this is far from the truth and is not inclusion. I know people mean well, but I do not require prayers for healing or for the sins of my fathers! I am currently training for ministry in the Baptist denomination, within which there is currently no Deaf church. Part of my role is outreach into the Deaf community to explore spirituality and to help the Deaf to have a true relationship with God and become fully part of the church.

We are all ‘one’, but we are not all the same. We are all members of the body with different functions, vital to the working of the whole (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26). In this context, how do we think about Deaf and hearing—is there really a way in which we can become one body? Or are our worlds so far apart that this is impossible?

There are of course differences within the Deaf community: hard of hearing; deafened and deaf; each having different needs. There are 800,000 people in the UK who are severely or profoundly deaf and it is estimated that 70,000 use British Sign Language (BSL) as their first and preferred language. Deaf people do not view themselves as disabled but to be a linguistic/cultural minority (Ladd).

The ‘deafened’ (people who have become deaf during the course of their life) have different needs to the Deaf. Their first language is spoken English. They may be able to lip-read from 3-6 ft with eye contact, but even then, they only understand 30% of the spoken word. They need good lighting, words spoken at a slow pace and a clear lip pattern (no beards, no chewing gum or large pieces of jewellery!). Lip-reading is very tiring and requires a high level of concentration. Deafened and Deaf both find it difficult to communicate within a group. It is hard to follow the conversation or prayers and to know who is speaking and when.

Belonging, as in being part of the body, recognises that there is a connection between the parts. A common language makes us feel connected and part of a group, and helps us to develop relationships. As a Deaf person I am very aware that the Deaf can easily become isolated, and feel more like an add-on to the hearing church rather than actually belonging and participating fully. For one thing, the quantity of words used in church is so overwhelming that the Deaf become passive onlookers,

rather than having an opportunity to develop spiritual understanding and relationship with God. They may be Deaf but they really do want to know about God!

In my role as MIT at Rising Brook BC, I set up a Deaf Café Church in March 2013 to enable the Deaf to open their minds and ask questions without fear of judgement. Deaf Christians were previously unable to access Bible groups and prayer sessions, because any Deaf sub-group in church is controlled by the language of the hearing and their ideas. Although the hearing are needed to aid in learning, the Deaf can be spoon-fed and are often left feeling undervalued and unworthy.

I have undertaken pastoral responsibility for the Deaf who attend the Café Church. When I visit homes the Deaf are so relieved to be able to communicate in their own language with me. They often release fears and anxieties that have been suppressed for many years; previously they would have felt uncomfortable having to go through an interpreter, who is in effect a third party. These visits require lots of time to build up trust and establish a positive relationship.

When I started up the Deaf Café Church I did suggest Deaf only, but when the hearing wanted to attend, what right did I have to say they are not welcome? I had to maintain my position and be careful that the Deaf still felt empowered and comfortable to communicate in their own language. Despite their best intentions hearing people have a tendency to take over and inflict their opinions!

To build the relationship between Deaf and hearing there is a need to shift the balance so that the hearing get a better understanding of the culture and language of the Deaf. Each part needs to know the other's needs. The Deaf Café Church allows freedom and release of emotions; it is a wonderful opportunity to witness people being true to themselves. Although hearing people may mean well, often the Deaf cannot express themselves for fear of being judged. Hearing people will also correct the Deaf, and undermine them because of a lack of understanding and respect for the Deaf culture. There is also a lot that the Deaf can learn from the hearing. The main issue is about wanting a relationship with each other and a desire to communicate with others, whether Deaf or hearing.

## **Deaf church**

As early as the 1830s, Deaf churches were established to enable the Deaf to worship in their own language and culture. There are now estimated to be 100-125 well established Deaf churches in the Church of England and Roman Catholic traditions, but none in our denomination. Deaf church offers a sense of belonging: people can pray, encourage and support each other. People generally go to homogeneous groups where they share a common language and culture which gives a sense of belonging. Deaf people desire this too, which is why they want to meet up, and they are prepared to travel long distances to have this opportunity.

The language of the Deaf is generally visual but this varies depending on educational background or age. Communication is the major barrier in meeting the needs of Deaf people, who find English words difficult to understand, resulting in a lack of confidence and a loss of personal value (see Shrine).

### **Main issues of inclusion**

Deaf people are restricted because of the need for interpreters, and when interpreters are present, they can still feel excluded because of the language and pace of the events—the resources do not meet their needs. There are different levels of interpreters and at least a BSL Level 2 qualification is required to interpret prayers and worship songs, and a Level 3 qualification for sermons and group discussions. Also, DVD subtitles are often not included and when they are, the language is often inaccessible.

Storytelling is very much part of Deaf culture because it is visual and more meaningful than verbal information. Deaf people can take on the roles of characters in a story and have no inhibitions about doing so, because that is part of their visual language. This medium could be a real opportunity for Deaf and hearing to enjoy working together. Language is the barrier between Deaf and hearing, and so is the biggest challenge for me in ministry with Deaf people. It takes effort on both sides to ensure that there is equal access to worship and the Bible by both Deaf and hearing.

There is much to learn, and I have to work towards building relationships and bridging the gap between Deaf and hearing in a way that does not offend or destroy the spirit of the other. In my experience, in both Deaf and hearing churches, there is a clear need for the majority to consider how they can change, allowing the minority to be encouraged and developed. Here is a challenge for us within the Baptist church: how do we help Deaf people to be included and to participate in the full life of the church. As Shrine states, ‘There can be no inclusion without empowerment’.

### **Conclusion**

A community by definition has common values, and we need to allow the Deaf community to receive the gospel, recognising the differences between Deaf and hearing and acknowledging that both can serve God in the church and need to belong. To ensure that the Deaf, the marginalised minority, truly become part of the body, there is a need for all parts of the one body, hearing and Deaf, to understand and acknowledge the needs of the other.

I have identified two major issues that impact on successful ministry with Deaf people: culture and language. Language is the most challenging problem and is clearly not easy to overcome. Words play a major part in Bible study and worship. There is a

need to explore other ways to allow a variety of methods of communicating the gospel to ensure that Deaf people are empowered and included.

Each part belongs to the other (Romans 12:5), so we need Deaf and hearing to find new and exciting ways to build relationships. Building the body of Christ is more about relationships than it is about being Deaf or hearing. My role of ministry to the Deaf has to focus on building bridges to enable the growth of relationships as well as seeking new ways to teach and facilitate spiritual growth for Deaf people.

***Susan Myatt is a student at NBLC and is developing Deaf church through Rising Brook BC in Staffordshire as MIT.***

#### **Further reading**

P. Ladd, 2010 *Understanding Deaf culture: in search of Deafhood*. Clevedon Multiigual Matters, 2010, p15.

B. Shrine, *Inclusion and empowerment: unresolved issues for Deaf people in the church*. Papers presented at meeting of the Deaf Perspectives Telford Conference Centre, July 2013.

H. Lewis, (2007) *Deaf liberation theology*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

***Facts and figures from <http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/your-hearing/about-deafness-and-hearing-loss/statistics.aspx>***

\*There are more than 10 m people in the UK with some form of hearing loss, or 1 in 6 of the population.

\*Of this total, 3.7 m are of working age (16-64) and 6.3 m are of retirement age (65+).

\*By 2031, it is estimated that there will be 14.5 m people with hearing loss in the UK.

\*More than 800,000 people in the UK are severely or profoundly deaf.

\*There are more than 45,000 deaf children in the UK, plus many more who experience temporary hearing loss.

\*More than 70% of over-70s and 40% of over-50s have some form of hearing loss.

\*There are approximately 356,000 people with combined visual and hearing impairment in the UK.

\*About 2 m people in the UK have hearing aids, but only 1.4 m use them regularly.

\*At least 4 m people who don't have hearing aids would benefit from using them.

\*On average it takes 10 years for people to address their hearing loss.

\*About 1 in 10 adults in the UK have mild tinnitus and up to 1% have tinnitus that affects their quality of life.

# On being a parent

by Faith Bowers

**A**s I write, the media is full of the story of a couple who wanted a family so much they paid a surrogate mother. When one twin was born with Down's Syndrome they only took his sister, leaving the boy with the woman whose poverty, presumably, had led her to lease out her womb. She is willing to give the baby love, and publicity has now ensured funds for medical care.

Forty-five years ago Brian and I learned that our newborn had Down's Syndrome. We were devastated, but it did not occur to us to reject the baby. If his hold on life had been tenuous in those early days, we would not have wanted him kept alive, but, unlike many with Down's, Richard had a sound heart and fed enthusiastically. It seemed that God intended him to survive and that made it easier for us to accept the challenge. It is tough to come to terms with having a child disabled from birth: you have all the grief for the lost child of your dreams and also a future changed for ever. At least we were spared the prenatal testing and decisions that later parents have had to face.

The paediatrician painted the gloomiest prognosis. In retrospect, we assume he had only seen Down's children who had received physical care but no mental stimulation. Today most are capable of much more. That was 1969, when few Down's children had the benefit of schooling: the 1970 Education Act opened doors for children like Richard. Nevertheless, throughout the early years we found medical 'experts' were continually depressing. We shall never forget being roundly told off by one who was assessing Richard for school because we had taught him to read about 30 words on flash cards. 'You middle-class parents, thinking that reading matters! He may recognise words parrot-fashion but he will never understand them!' We had begun when we saw him sort post by Daddy (Dr) and Mummy (Mrs/Mr) letters.

In the face of repeated discouragement it was natural for us, from the first, to turn to our church as our natural support group; and the church did not fail us. There—and for a long time almost only there—he was never, as elsewhere, stereotyped as 'one of those children' but always 'Richard'. God's people valued his individuality and, in so doing, conveying God's love for him just as he was. The church was great—years of hearing an inclusive gospel preached undoubtedly helped. The lady who ran the creche had raised a daughter with learning disabilities, who in turn was gifted in relating to small children and took the youngest Sunday school class: both took Richard to heart.

Nonetheless, we felt uncomfortable about imposing our child's disability on the

church. We were conscious that the church had an added incentive to welcome him, since his father was the church treasurer. Would it have been as welcoming if we were on the fringe? I hope—I believe—that Bloomsbury would have responded well anyway, but that has not been the experience of all parents in all churches.

We have learned, through the work of BUild, that many Christian parents wrestle with theological questions forced on them by disability. Most would not otherwise normally tackle weighty theology. There is something challenging about what appears to be creation ‘going wrong’—particularly when the disability dates from conception, as with genetic aberrations like Down’s.

### **A God of love?**

For me, it raised questions about the omnipotence of a God of love. We were young parents, not in a high-risk category. We had prayed for this baby even before he was conceived, yet it seemed that from the first he never ‘had a chance’. I was not helped by Christian books sent by well-meaning friends. The mothers in them seemed to have devoted themselves to the Down’s child to the exclusion of husband and other children. I had no wish to emulate them! But one letter was salutary: a woman who was barren wrote, ‘I know you must be angry with God’— and I realised that we had not blamed God, but rather those forces of evil that distort God’s good world. Gradually I came to see God’s omnipotence in the power to bring good out of apparently bad situations.

Being Baptists did not help. Infant baptism might have been reassuring, embracing the baby within the church rather than wondering whether he would ever be capable of personal faith. Later I discovered that some who baptise infants have declined this for a Down’s baby, saying there is no point since God loves the child anyway. Rejection by the church does not convey God’s love to the parents!

Meanwhile, we had to accept the child we had and do our best by him. We struggled not to see the baby as ‘subhuman’, and the demanding process of raising him ultimately futile, as doctors implied. Parents do not want ‘holy innocents’, ‘angels unawares’— and actually delight in signs of deliberate naughtiness as a mark of normal humanity. We prayed that somehow God would make Richard’s life—and our efforts—useful. I found most comfort in the words of an old hymn, *How firm a foundation, especially God’s promise to ‘sanctify to you your deepest distress’.*

Acceptance was important for our faith and for Richard’s development. Later we knew a girl with a different learning disability and no self-confidence. She too was loved by Christian parents, but her mother prayed daily for healing, looking for a change that never happened. Every day her daughter was a disappointment. The leader of the group both attended saw the mothers’ attitudes reflected in the young adults.

We embarked on the slow process of teaching Richard, helped by his brother, only 3½ years older, but determined to teach through their play: ‘Can you find two red cars, Richard? Good, now is there a yellow one?’. Although slow to absorb anything new, Richard had a good memory and retained things once learnt. When he went to a special school, the teachers were ‘on our side’, always trying to move him forward rather than telling us that it was hopeless.

At church he blossomed, often showing new skills there first, probably because he had a certain freedom—with everyone looking out for him, we could be less protective. We still felt that we were imposing him on the Sunday school, especially as he lagged further behind others of the same age. Those nearest in age were girls so it was easy for him to join the mixed group a little younger, but it still cannot have been easy for the teachers. They never complained to us, bless them, and always tried to include him—even on weekends away. On one occasion he got separated from the group in the middle of York, to the alarm of the minister in charge. Richard, however, told some policemen that Barbara and the others had disappeared while he retied a shoelace and he was regaled with lemonade and buns at the police station until they tracked down his party. His speech, not very clear in those days, had proved adequate.

## **Baptism**

When he was 16, Richard told Barbara he wanted her to take him in the water. ‘Why?’ She asked. ‘Because I love Jesus!’. We were grateful that she decided he was ready for baptism and that the church supported her. Some churches refer to the parents and that is really not fair. They are probably the least able to determine the reality of faith, torn between wanting to see the best in their child and their reluctance to impose on their church. His brother laughed at our doubts—sharing a room he was privy to Richard’s nightly prayer conversations.

Baptismal studies, carefully adjusted to his understanding, were a great delight—not least to be given homework for the first time. We had not realised he was conscious of missing out on something his brother and cousins did. In the first baptismal class Barbara was surprised to find he could look up Bible references for himself—he must have watched us. He learns best visually. He had just about mastered reading by the time he left school but would soon have lost the skill without practice—the motivation to maintain it lay in those Bible studies with Barbara. We began to appreciate the Bible as a primer—most stories are contained in a few verses, perfect for someone who can read but not sustain the necessary concentration for long. Thus his reading skills became well established. Barbara and then her successors have continued to give him occasional special teaching which he greatly appreciates.

The church celebrated Richard's baptism with cards and gifts, and he marks the anniversary each year. Becoming a church member was precious to him and, with the church's patient encouragement, he has found ways to serve. Nearly 30 years on he is on rotas for stewarding and catering, ready to move furniture or tidy up, contribute to open prayer times, and always one of the first to greet people.

It was difficult when the teenager began to recognise the features of others with Down's. It was painful to hear him ask God to change his face. Happily he grew beyond this, helped by joining in the work of BUild and grasping that through his disability he could help others. Once, at a Baptist Assembly, Richard Kidd told me that he hardly knew what to say to friends whose grandchild had just been born with Down's. My adult Richard volunteered, 'Tell them it's not the end of the world. I don't mind having Down's Syndrome. It's not the end of the world.' No, indeed—it just feels like that in the early days!

Richard still lives with us and it is a moot point who is carer and cared for as we get older. I love the way he ensures that I, with my skirt and stick, am safely in the car before he closes the door—after all those years when I was checking him! He has proved able to do far more than those early doctors predicted—as have many of his friends. He is a 'people person' and we have learned from him much about friendly interaction. He has a friendly word with anyone he meets, leaving all smiling.

So we have a success story, but it has not always been easy. We were blessed with a strong marriage and a supportive church. Often, fathers cannot cope with a disabled child and its toll on the mother's energy. Churches are not always a great support.

A success story: but my life was changed. We learned that parents of a disabled child are effectively disabled (and often treated as unintelligent too). I would probably have picked up a career when the children were at school, but possibilities were restricted by his short school day, plus the way every cold turned to bronchitis. The council provided a car to take him to and fro but I had to be at home for it (no other Mum for back-up cover at the school gate). As he got older, I developed a satisfying alternative voluntary career—possible on my husband's income, as long as we did not envy the more luxurious homes and holidays our friends could afford.

We had it relatively easy. It is harder for single mothers, or when children have more severe and multiple disabilities. It is important that pastors and friends get beyond a certain easy admiration for those who try to smile as they struggle to cope.

***Faith Bowers has been a member of Bloomsbury Central BC since 1961 and was a cofounder of Build, the Baptist group helping churches in their ministry to people with learning disabilities and their families. Faith has also served on the LBA and BUGB Councils.***



# Seeing things my way

by Glen Graham

**I**t has been my privilege to be the moderator of the Disability Justice Group of the BU for the past three years. When I took on the role, I never imagined the journey I would go on! We have sought to identify areas where disabled people may feel that they are not included in regular church and to find practical and creative ways to help.

Barriers to inclusion are many, but can be:

*\*Theological:* assumptions about the origins of disability and the connection with sin. We need to rediscover what it means to be human and made in God's image—which includes disability at its heart.

*\*Practical and attitudinal:* where people, because of the physical environment or attitudes of others, feel they do not have a part to play in the body of Christ.

We have challenged these issues in a number of ways. The seminar at the Baptist Assembly in 2013 was a defining moment of this process, which resulted in other opportunities to raise awareness about the real issues disabled people face.

In this article, I want to do a number of things. First, I want to share my experiences as a minister who is blind. I use this term rather than 'blind minister', because this is how I see myself. I do not minister primarily to blind people. My calling is the same as any other accredited Baptist minister. I am also keen to point out that I am a minister first, who just happens to be blind—thus putting the emphasis in a deliberate place.

Second, I want to make some general remarks about blindness itself; and finally, I want to draw attention to some specific issues that ministers may need to think about when ministering to blind people—I need to think about them as much as anyone else.

## Ministry experience

So what is ministry like for me? I would be a rich man indeed if I had a pound for everyone who has asked me 'what is it like being a blind minister?' My glib but true reply is, 'much the same as being any other kind of minister but with a twist'. There is no doubt that I have to do things slightly differently, but the beauty of the ministry is that each person called brings her or his own unique twist to ministry.

We minister out of our experience of God, of ourselves and the way we are made, and also of the world. The blindness forms a part of the experience of being myself which comes to the role as does being middle-aged or having been brought up on a rough council estate. All our experiences help inform how we see our vocation and to some degree how we interact with God and the world. When I get together with my colleagues, I never talk about my particular experiences of being a minister who is blind, but rather share the joys and frustrations common to all ministry.

My passions and drives are much the same as others. I am concerned about the decline in the western church. I am passionate about creating healthy churches which are true and living communities of faith that offer the welcome of Christ to all. I am concerned about whether I am encouraging missionary disciples who are real about themselves and their faith so that they can live a life that reflects the image and character of Christ. I am passionate about opening the Bible to people so that the story of faith comes alive in their hearts. My disability is very much in the background of all these other concerns. When I am asked what is it like to be a blind minister, I have to think really hard, for I am me, and I bring my personality and weakness to the table for God to use graciously.

Of course there are some things which make the task of ministry a little different, but I have never found my blindness getting in the way of effective ministry (whatever that may mean). Thanks to modern technology, I can keep up to date with the latest theological books and ideas—it is the same technology that other people use, but with a Dalek-like voice reading it. I am typing this article on an ordinary laptop without voice recognition since I can touch-type.

When it comes to getting around, I rely on my trusty yet playful guide dog, Robson, and a SatNav. When I arrive at someone's home, I listen carefully to what is said and pick up from the inflection in the voice what is going on in their heart. I have also learnt to hear what is not being said, because that gives away so much. In terms of church meetings, I am fortunate that I enjoy chairing—which I know is a little odd, and I probably need prayer for it! The congregations have learnt to break the rules they were taught at school—you have to shout out! I can honestly say I have never fallen down a hole in a churchyard yet, which was a concern at my Ministerial Recognition interview.

To me, ministry is the fulfilment of a dream I had as a teenager. I cannot imagine doing anything else. I am fortunate to do something I really love and that enthusiasm comes across to people I meet. I am sometimes made to feel guilty by other blind people that I am in work at all, never mind the fact that I enjoy it. According to the latest figures I picked up somewhere, 90% of blind people of working age do not have a job.

Getting into ministry in the first place was not easy. It is all very well for me to know what I can do, but getting that across to others is an uphill task. It took the best part of two years for me to get a call to a church when I left college, and it has always taken

time to find a church when I have sought a move. I am currently in my third church and I can look back at my years in ministry with happy memories. Hopefully the odd life has been changed by the transfiguring grace of God. I am hoping to become an accredited spiritual director within the next couple of years. How many people in any walk of life can say they really live the dream? I can.

Do I ever wish life had taken a different turn? Absolutely not. I have never resented my blindness or wished I were different. It has given me perspectives on life which I may not otherwise have had. I do not mind boasting of my physical limitations, for God is powerfully at work through them. I just long for a churches to celebrate difference and be flexible enough to make roles fit the people who are called to fill them. I have always been fully involved in church so I can only imagine what it is like for those who have not. I just pray that I may be of some use to God and grow in the process.

### **General points**

I want to make some general points about blindness. One might assume that to be blind means to see nothing and read Braille, but I can see shadows and know the difference between day and night. My wife is registered blind although she has a degree of useful vision, but her field of vision is very poor. In familiar places she is confident but she has trouble telling depths of pavements or how deep a flight of stairs is. She also struggles with crowds, so three years ago she got her first guide dog, Kate. I tell you this to illustrate the differing levels of sight within the blind spectrum. For my wife, the colour of a room and the quality of the lighting helps, but she is considered blind. Regarding Braille, the number of readers is falling. I read recently that there might only be 6000 heavy users of Braille in the UK (of which I am one).

There are two types of blind person—first, those who have been blind for all or most of their lives, like myself. We are often known as ‘lifers’, which always raises a smile. Second, those who lose their sight during their adult lives, often towards the end of their lives. This distinction is important when considering how best to minister to blind people and we will turn to that now.

How can we ensure that blind people feel they belong in our churches? We do not need to panic straight away that we cannot provide Braille. The most important thing is that people feel welcomed and wanted. Listening is the minister’s greatest asset in this area—let the person tell his/her story, then ask them what they need. If they tell you a solution, do not question it as they truly know best. Ask questions of those with limited sight how best to facilitate the worship experience. Sometimes large print books are easier than screens, but if you use a screen, ask what colour the writing should be and how large. Also bear in mind the difference that colour contrasts and sunny weather may

make to everyone (not just the visually impaired). Further, the blind person before you will not be able to initiate conversation, so make sure you are the one to do it. I guess the golden rule is, listen, ask and respond.

I asked around to see how blind Christians and those who worked with them would answer the question: ‘what do you want our churches to do for you?’, and three issues came to the fore.

**First**, we just want to serve and use our gifts to the glory of God. We don’t want things done to or for us. Many blind people describe the real pain of not being able to serve in the local church alongside sighted church members. There are many stories of good practice, but from my limited experience these are the exception rather than the rule. If you have examples, then do let me know so they can be shared.

**The second** major issue is how do we minister to folk with sight loss or indeed any sensory loss? It is a real grieving process and needs to be treated as such. Often these people are very lonely and isolated and all they need is a friend. The Torch Trust for the Blind is working hard to produce resources and training events under the umbrella of their programme *Journeying with people with sight loss*.

**Finally** there are access issues, to do with information and services (buildings are not so much of an issue). Many of these access issues can be overcome by listening, asking and acting. The Torch Trust is the first port of call for any issue concerning blindness and the Christian faith.

For many of us, this article may be the beginning of a journey. I have spent my life mainly in the sighted world so I have to think quite hard about what it is like for other blind people. My journey of faith and ministry has largely been a positive one, and this is why I am involved in the work to make our churches more inclusive. I have no real axe to grind or points to score. When I read of the kingdom of God, I see a place of hope where the richness of diversity is an expression of that hope. The story of the great banquet in Luke 14 always captures my imagination. Those who have everything ‘sorted’ including their beliefs, refuse to come to the banquet so the King opens his doors to those he may of wanted in the first place? Why wait till the end of time for this vision to be fulfilled? May this kingdom where the least and the lost take pride of place break out among us now. We are here to redeem the cosmos not wait for the bus to heaven. Every time we take the time and welcome those who are different from ourselves and share their lives with ours, we are redeeming the cosmos—and who doesn’t want to do that?

**Glen Graham is minister of Cullompton Baptist Church, and would be glad to help readers further. The Torch Trust can be contacted on 01858 438260 or email them on [info@torchtrust.org](mailto:info@torchtrust.org).**

# The Disability Justice Group

by David Buckingham & Jerry Newson

**A**t the Baptist Union Council in November 2010, it was agreed that BUGB would establish three Justice Groups: gender, race and disability (at the time under Faith and Unity). The first two already existed, the latter would be added. Discussions were held over the following year to ensure that a Disability Justice Group could be established in November 2011. Since then members of this group have worked to implement the purposes for which it had been formed. But why was there a need in the first place?

To answer this question, we need to go back nearly 30 years. During that time, work with and on behalf of people with learning disabilities had been undertaken by BUild (Baptist Union Initiative with people with Learning Disabilities), which had been originally established as part of the BU Education Department under the leadership of Bryan George. When this department was closed in 1991, BUild became a network largely independent of the BUGB structure, with its work funded by subscription.

BUild was set up in response to questions from churches, Christian parents and carers, to address the spiritual needs of children with severe learning disabilities—notably ‘How can they learn that Jesus loves them?’. It has continued to promote this purpose by providing pastoral support, preparing appropriate resources, providing training and developing awareness. This has been done in different ways, notably through regional conferences, *BUild News*, relevant publications, by being available for advice and support, and through theological research.

However, BUild’s independence of the BU structure has meant that it has had great difficulty in getting its voice heard. Richard Kidd, already a member of the Faith and Unity Group and the convenor of BUild, together with the rest of the BUild Working Group, felt very strongly that BUild should be there, as a recognised part of the BU structure within a Disability Justice Group. Such a group would also represent those with physical and other disabilities, as well as learning ones. Such a group would affect the attitudes to Baptist Assemblies and publications among other things. Richard prepared a discussion document to this effect in November 2008. This document was discussed fully by both the BUild Working Group and the Faith and Unity Department, under the leadership of Graham Sparkes.

The main arguments for the setting up of DJG were as follows.

1. As BUGB considers itself an inclusive community, by increasing our ability to respond to issues of disability and by deepening our relationships with people for whom disability is a significant feature of their lives, we should ensure that we are enriched by the contributions which people with disability can and already do make to our life as a gospel people. They are companions with whom we share the work of the gospel.

2. BUGB and its churches should fulfil particular responsibilities to ensure they comply fully with the law. The Baptist Union Corporation has helped churches do this through its paper on the Disability Discrimination Act (1996). However, they should also enable active participation in those campaigning and advocacy programmes seeking to reverse the radical imbalance which has long remained the status quo in our society and in many of our church communities.

### **Longer term goals**

With regards to Disability Justice what should BUGB have in place in the longer term?

\* A structure to allow BUGB to be proactive in the advocacy of justice for all people with disabilities. This would affect the publicity and publications structures of the Union and provide a framework through which, from the earliest stages of planning, the voices of people with disabilities can be heard in the shaping and the organisation of events such as Association and National Assemblies. This is the only way in which the profile of people with disabilities, not as a problem but as a resource for the life of the Union and its churches, will achieve the status (normal standing orders) that it deserves.

\* A structure to monitor changes in the legal responsibilities of churches and ministers. This would ensure that all such matters are picked up appropriately within the BU.

\* A structure to identify and encourage creative work on different aspects of disability. Aspects needing regular attention would include:

***Learning disabilities:*** this would continue to include many of the concerns already undertaken by BUild. Areas not yet covered but increasingly significant include the many varieties of dyslexia and the difficulties experienced by those with less understood and less affirmed preferred learning styles. Increasingly in recent years, questions are being asked about how those with Autism and Asperger's can be enabled to be fully included within the life of our churches.

***Physical and sensory disabilities:*** this would include issues relating to wheelchair users, people with hearing impairments, people with visual impairments, and people

with other specific physical impairments.

***Mental health issues:*** quite a number of our churches are doing useful work, while others may be struggling and needing support.

\* A structure to identify the need for and the production of appropriate resources to enable each of the above groups to function. This has been a major part of BUild's work and needs to continue. Explanatory literature with links to web-based information also needs gathering for people with various physical impairments, as well as resources to help churches respond to people with particular needs in their own communities. Much of this is a matter of sharing good practice.

Despite the enthusiasm, progress on Disability Justice moved fairly slowly! Eventually, following conversations between Faith and Unity and representatives of BUild, who offered experience of working with people with learning disabilities, many of whom also have physical disabilities, Graham Sparkes produced a document on Equality and Diversity in September 2010. This set down the then current arrangements and the proposal for a new way forward, with the formation of three Justice Groups which would stand Baptists in good stead for future times. An appendix to the document included the proposed terms of reference for each group.

Following affirmation from the BU Council, each group was launched, with Gender and Racial Justice Groups using the existing resources and representatives. The Disability Justice Group started from scratch by drawing some representation from BUild with others approached to join because of their known experience, passion and interest in this area. From the outset it was recognised that the DJG would be worse off if it did not have the benefit of representation, contact and dialogue with people with disabilities in the wider Baptist family. Following discussion it was agreed that this area was vital to us all and that in due course we would seek to form, from across the wider Baptist family, a consultative network of people with personal and professional experience of working with people with disabilities.

The purpose of the DJG is as follows.

\* To explore and reflect theologically on issues within and beyond BUGB from the perspective of disability justice.

\* To develop an ongoing programme of work that enables a deeper engagement by BUGB with disability justice.

\* To monitor and challenge as necessary the life and structures of BUGB to ensure that at all levels disability justice is fully addressed, that instances of injustice receive appropriate attention, and that inclusive ways of living and being become the norm.

\* To encourage and support churches, associations and colleges in developing,

promoting and monitoring policies and practices that reflect equality for those with disabilities.

\* To work with others (eg the Ministry Department and the Colleges) to ensure that all people are helped to discern and respond to a call to ministry, and to access appropriate training.

\* To work with others in developing competencies for all ministers relating to disability justice.

\* To work with BUild in developing appropriate responses to the needs of those with learning disabilities.

\* To promote with others the aims and objectives in respect of disability justice.

\* To maintain links and involvement with wider Baptist and ecumenical bodies for the purpose of shared understanding and collaborative work on disability justice.

From that initial meeting, we have endeavoured to produce a work programme for the coming years, based on this statement of purpose. Potential areas of work had previously emerged during initial discussions around the creation of the DJG:

**Bibliography:** DJG Bibliography: to include appropriate books, resources, organisations *etc* (suggestions would be welcome).

**Data:** How do we know how many of our Baptist family are disabled? Where are they? Who are they? How well are they served with resources, access *etc*? A discussion took place with regards to data from the BU Annual Returns and what if any questions are asked with regards to disability. (A questionnaire on disability was sent out to all churches with the 2013 BU census; the results are being examined.)

**Colleges:** exploration with colleges to ascertain the level and amount of input on disability issues in ministerial formation.

**Baptist Union:** BU publications should have accessible versions such as was seen in Five Core Values and Covenant 2000. Consultation needs to be automatic between the DJG and the BU especially with regards to future publications and BU assemblies.

**Regional Associations:** to be encouraged to appoint a Disability Champion from among their executive, to promote DJG guidance, monitor regional activities and ensure Associations are aware of the needs of those with disabilities and what help is available to them through the DJG.

**Website:** it was felt important that we create our own DJG section on the BU website.

What can you do to help us in our work? We are hoping to put together a list of people who would be willing to act as consultants, Baptists who have experience of



disability issues, whether personally or professionally—but not to attend meetings you will be pleased to hear! If you know of anyone who might welcome this opportunity for service in this way, do let us know, but do ask them first!

... and do pray for the members of the Disability Justice Group, that we may know God’s wisdom as we seek to explore ways of pursuing our purpose.

And so the story continues...

***David Buckingham and Jerry Newson are Baptist ministers who have both been significant members of Build and the DRJ.***

## ***Same-sex marriage: responses***

### ***Does gender matter?***

Thank you for biting the bullet over same-sex marriage in the July *bmj*. I hope any responses you get are thoughtful and kind!

Two aspects stood out for me. The first was Phil Jump's recognition that the legislation on same-sex marriage was a ‘monumental change’ to the laws of our land. This often seems to be ignored by those who say it was simply a natural extension of equal legal rights to all. Marriage—at least in the traditional sense of the word—is far more than a legal contract. It has always been understood and defined in dictionaries, Registrar's offices, Prayer Books, literature *etc*—quite apart from the Bible—as the union of a man and a woman. In justifying same-sex marriage Keith refers to St Augustine. He would have taken it for granted that he was talking about the union of a man and a woman, of course. In British law, that definition has now been changed. Other past ‘redefinitions’ of marriage (criminalising of polygamy *etc*) have not been nearly as profound.

The second aspect was Keith's reference to the complementarity of the marriage relationship—‘there is a complementarity that can only be found across genders...but there are other kinds that move beyond our traditional understanding of humanity as a “two-sex species”’. There are all sorts of ways in which people complement one another in their relationships, but the idea that the two sexes are simply a ‘traditional understanding’ of humanity (or any other species come to that) strikes me as very odd. There is a tiny number of people whose gender may be uncertain, but the division between male and female is fundamental to the whole natural world. It is built into our language, and everyone one of us depends on it for our existence. Marriage has, until now, always been an expression of that unique complementarity.

Homosexual people have suffered shameful discrimination, and deserve the same right as anyone else to enter a loving, committed relationship, and to have that relationship recognized and honoured by others. Now in law they can call such a relationship marriage. I am not particularly concerned about the legal use of the term—the significance of marriage is understood in many different ways these days. But to maintain that gender is an immaterial or a marginal factor in human relationships, and especially committed sexual relationships, is absurd.

For me, the consequence is that I would not be able to conduct a same-sex marriage service in church, although I would hope to find ways of affirming and seeking God's blessing on gay and lesbian people, including those in committed relationships.

May the *bmj* long continue to stimulate our thinking as Baptist ministers, and enable us to share views on important issues like this.

**Peter Shepherd, minister, Stoneygate Baptist Church Leicester.**

### **WWJD?**

Having read July's journal and recently attended a LBA consultation on same-sex marriage (SSM) I noticed a repeated refrain—What Would Jesus Do? As Baptists we believe that Christ is the head of the church and therefore seek to discern the mind of Christ as revealed in the scriptures.

This is an interesting question since, it is often claimed, Jesus didn't say anything about homosexuality. In this short article I'd like to challenge that assumption. If we want to know what Jesus thought about marriage then look at Matthew 19:

*3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" 4 "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' 5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' ? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." 7 "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"*

*8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."*

*10 The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."*

*11 Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. 12 For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have*

*been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”*

So what does Jesus have to say about marriage here then?

1. Jesus defined marriage as being between a man and a woman. In vv 4 and 5. Jesus thought that marriage was a creation ordinance, given by God, between men and women. Of course it is legitimate to ask questions about how these words apply to us today, but if we are really concerned with what Jesus thinks then we must start with what he actually said about marriage. And here it is: Jesus defines marriage as being between a man and a woman.

2. Jesus saw all sexual intercourse outside heterosexual marriage as immoral. We see that by his use of the word *porneia* in v 9. Translated in the NIV as ‘sexual immorality’ it is the famous exceptive clause in Matthew 19 to do with grounds for divorce. Jesus may have been discussing divorce here but it is interesting for our definition of marriage that he uses this word here. It literally means ‘illicit sex’ and while different people in the 1st century would place their boundaries slightly differently we know what was meant—any sex outside heterosexual marriage. If you asked a Jew in Jesus’ day if homosexual practice was ‘illicit sex’ they would not hesitate in replying, ‘Yes!’

3. Jesus said that those who could not accept his teaching should not marry. The disciples are taken aback by how serious Jesus is, and respond by wondering if singleness is better. Jesus does not agree, but he does agree that some people should not get married—he outlines ‘eunuchs’ for whom it is ‘better not to marry’.

A lot of ink has been spilt over the different ‘types’ of eunuchs to which Jesus refers in v 12. More recently, some commentators have wondered if ‘eunuchs who were born that way’ might include those with homosexual orientation. Even among the scientific community the interplay between nurture and nature in sexual orientation is hotly contested and so it is unwise to read too much into Jesus’ words. Nonetheless the main thing to notice is the advice that those who cannot accept Jesus’ teaching on heterosexual marriage should not marry. That seems to be directly relevant to the question of SSM. Jesus says, ‘No!’

I’m sure some will disagree with my reading of Matthew 19, but I hope they will at least engage with the text. There are legitimate questions about how we move from the text to 21st century Britain but the text must be where we begin. When I hear people talking about what Jesus thinks about SSM I mostly hear arguments based on what Jesus said about other issues and then seeking to apply principles from those passages to marriage. Why don’t we start with what he actually said about marriage?

***John Smuts, Rayners Lane Baptist Church.***

# Reviews

Edited by John Goddard

## ***Transforming faith communities***

Michael Bochenski

Pickwick Publications 2013

***Reviewer: Brian Haymes***

I first met Michael Bochenski in the late 1980s when we were both ministers in Lancashire. He had come north from his first pastorate in Cowley, gripped with a passion for ministry concerned with the renewal of the church and the world. This passion still grips him as he has served in other local churches, in pastoral teaching in Poland and in community programmes as he explored what it is to have faith in God, to follow Jesus Christ, and to engage creatively with the world living in the *missio dei* with the message of the Kingdom.

Now, after these long years of ministry and steady reflection, we have a doctoral thesis from him. Because it is a thesis it is no light read and there are plenty of nits for the scholars to pick at. But it is an important and at times inspiring read, a gift to all those who are concerned with the call of the Christlike God and the consequent

engagement with the mission of the church in the world.

The focus is on early Anabaptist movements in Europe and modern South American expressions of liberation theology. Helpfully Michael brings these two into conversation by addressing themes such as responding to revolution, persecution, building communities of faithful following, evangelism and the interaction of Word and world.

The research is carefully done and I found interesting new insights into responses to Christendom from the Anabaptists of Eastern Europe. Any who suppose that these radical disciples inevitably fell into a separatist stance with regard to their community context will have to think again.

I warmly commend this book. It comes out of careful reflection, study and pastoral life. The stories of both movements provoke serious reflection as the church still lives with the foundation stories of the calling of a people and the God of liberation.

## ***Building up the Body***

Richard Steel

BRF 2013

***Reviewer: Martin Gillard***

This is an important subject for everyday church life, and is very well covered by the author. It would be a

good book to study with your leadership team, especially if you would like to see more people who regularly attend your services become actively involved serving in the life of the church and beyond its stone walls.

There are 12 easy-to-read, practical and helpful chapters covering why people volunteer, understanding the motivations of volunteers in different age generations, exercising body ministry through gifts and fruit, widening our understanding of volunteering to include previously un-thought of volunteers, how to approach volunteers, how to build teams, the importance of the leaders example, the problems of merging paid workers and volunteers, the practicalities of policies and procedures, what to do when a volunteer steps down, conflict resolution among volunteers, and remembering to think beyond the church walls.

There was also a helpful appendix including contact lists for groups focused on volunteering and sample policies for good practice; and downloadable material available for groups from the Bible Reading Fellowship website.

If we believe in the priesthood of all believers we need to find ways of mobilising our members to active service inside and outside of our worship services. As it says on the back cover 'Volunteering is the lifeblood of local churches'. Does your local body of Christ need a blood transfusion? This book will help.

## ***Creating Community***

Simon Reed

BRF

### ***Reviewer: Bob Little***

This book champions three practices from the first millennium to enable churches today to become living communities: a way of life; a network of soul friends, and a rhythm of prayer. Simon Reed offers these to answer two key questions seemingly being asked of the contemporary church: how do we create, maintain and deepen a genuine and lasting community, and how do we create mature adult disciples of Jesus?

Arguing passionately and persuasively that US approaches to, and schemes of, evangelism are counterproductive because they don't resonate sufficiently with British culture, Reed looks for guidance to a different millennium rather than a different geography.

As one of the three Guardians of the Community of Aidan and Hilda, as well as being a vicar in London, Reed advocates a monastic approach. Adopting a way of life means applying the Bible's teaching in practical ways: developing a 'to do' list for how to connect with God and how to connect God with the whole of life. Journeying with a soul friend - a mature Christian who's in sympathy with your way of life and helps you discern and respond appropriately to God's will—is an ancient euphemism for today's buzzwords of spiritual buddying, mentoring and coaching.

Like the soul friend concept, the value of 'journeying in a rhythm of prayer'—in community with others either physically or virtually, via technology, at set times - seems self-evident. Yet one of the highly positive characteristics of this book is that it doesn't merely discuss these issues, it offers practical suggestions for implementing them in today's society.

Rather than being an academic guide to 'new monasticism', Reed's highly practical and praiseworthy approach is a valuable *vade mecum*.

***Philippi: how Christianity began in Europe***

*Eduard Verhoef*

*Bloomsbury T&T Clark*

***Reviewer: John Morgan-Wynne***

The author is retired Dutch Baptist minister with research links to Pretoria University. The book is a labour of love for one who loves Greece and is fascinated by ancient Philippi.

He sets the scene with the early history of Philippi; gives a brief description of Paul's letter; and then gives short chapters to what can be known about Christianity at Philippi from the 2nd to 6th centuries and the final demise of the town. The book is printed on splendid paper and is richly furnished with some excellent colour photographs of archaeological remains. It is a joy to handle and read.

What of the contents? I would say (using a card-playing metaphor) that Verhoef has done a good job with a poor hand. By that, I mean that the actual hard evidence for what was going on in the Christian community in Philippi is fairly sparse. This is illustrated by the fact that 33 pages deal with the 2nd to 6th centuries, compared with 37 discussing Paul's letter to the Philippians itself. Verhoef uses what is available to good effect.

This does raise the question of whether it was necessary to print the NRSV of Acts 16 and Philippians itself. Could not the space have been better used by expanding discussions on the material elsewhere? At the retail price of £16.19 this is a very expensive book for what it offers to the minister in pastoral charge.

***The Narrow Road to the Deep North***

Richard Flanagan

Vintage Digital (Kindle edn) 2014

***Reviewer: John Goddard***

Over the past few years I have consciously chosen to read contemporary literature, and in particular novels nominated for the annual Man Booker Prize. I have never particularly felt the need to justify this decision: I was simply looking for something that might stretch and stimulate me. I am the sort of reader

who easily slips into the comfort of re-reading favourite authors, or fixating on a particular genre to the exclusion of all others.

By allowing someone else to decide on my reading choices, in this case the annual panel of Booker judges, I found myself taken to times and places I would never otherwise have journeyed. And, of course, I have been reminded that no two readers share identical taste. What on earth were the judges thinking when they made some of their long-list selections (usually 13 books a year), and why do they so seldom pick the right winner? Or is it just me...

As a Christian minister it has been fascinating to notice just how often themes of religious faith and practice feature in chosen books. A particular highlight, although somewhat controversial, was Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary* (2013). This creative rewriting of the gospel account through the eyes of Mary, the mother of Jesus, may not help us in our quest for the historical Jesus but is heart-wrenchingly illuminating in its portrayal of human grief and loss. For me, this highlights what I find so helpful as a minister about good contemporary writing. It opens windows onto the rich variety of human experience, helping me to understand myself and others just a little bit better.

By the time this article is published the 2014 winner will probably have just

been announced, while as I write we are still 10 days away from the longlist becoming a shortlist. As such, and given that I am yet to read some of the list, I am unlikely to pick the winner. But I do want to commend to you my 'winner so far'—*The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Richard Flanagan.

The heart of this book is the brutal realities of life on the Thailand-Burma railway in 1943, seen through the eyes of Australian POWs, their Japanese captors and their Korean guards. What is unusual about this particular fictional account is the way that Flanagan gives us the big picture of the lives involved – not simply the story of heroism, sacrifice and sadism during the building of the railway, but something of how those characters became who they were, and how they were changed by the experience. As such, this is a good book. But what lifted it beyond good for me was a moment of grace in the midst of the grief and despair. Without giving too much away, there is a moment of acceptance and forgiveness, in the context of a simple communal meal, that reduced me to tears as I read it, and again when I tried to tell someone of it the next day. Acceptance and forgiveness, around a meal table... Sound familiar?

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**Interested in reviewing?**

**Contact John Goddard**

**(details on inside front cover)**