



## Making worship inclusive

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### 1. Introduction

Public worship is one of the few occasions and environments in our society when people of all backgrounds and abilities are invited to gather together and participate in a common activity. Every congregation, from the smallest village or estate church to the largest eclectic city congregation, will have within them a wide range of abilities. From those who are physically fit and mentally able to process language and metaphor, to people with physical and intellectual disabilities who will find the physical and cognitive requirements for participation in worship challenging.

Anglican worship can take a variety of forms, from the celebration of mystery in Anglo-Catholic worship to the high-tech band and PowerPoint worship of Charismatic Evangelical churches. In all of these contexts though, thinking about inclusion is important. Worship should invite people into a corporate experience that is accessible and encourages belonging and participation for all who attend, no matter what their abilities or disabilities may be.

Many churches will have a variety of services during the month, some of which it is hoped will be appealing and accessible to all. All-age worship, café style services, creative and participatory services and more. What is most important is to never make any assumptions that you know what will be accessible. For example, relaxed, café style services with lots of conversation and participation, which you imagine everyone will enjoy, can be very inaccessible to those who find social interaction and conversation difficult. They are also difficult for people with hearing loss as they often involve group conversations with significant background noise, making hearing and



understanding difficult. People with sight loss can also have difficulty in these services as trying to understand people talking across a table involves more lip reading than you might imagine. So, your all-inclusive café service really only includes those that have a high level of social confidence and the sensory abilities necessary to interact and participate.

Talk to your congregation about how accessible and inclusive they find your services. In particular, make a point of talking to the occasional attenders and to those who stay away from any particular services. The voices, views and perspectives of disabled people are crucial to you finding ways of improving access and inclusion and becoming a church where disabled people find they can fully belong and participate in all aspects of the life and ministry of the church.

Traditionally our worship is rooted in the use of words which seek to express literal truth, story and metaphor. Most of the time we switch from one to another seamlessly and without explanation, assuming that people in the congregation are able to process the twists and turns of scripture, liturgy and the poetry of hymns and songs. We also often give universal instructions in rubrics and announcements. Telling people to sit or kneel or stand and ordering people to greet their neighbours during the peace etc. Much of our worship also demands a high level of literacy with the requirement to read large amounts of text that changes from week to week, making memorising difficult as well.

Thinking about physical and sensory access to worship is important.

- Can wheelchair users be accommodated within the body of the congregation and do they have a choice of where they might sit rather than being 'parked' in an allocated space?
- Are there chairs/pews with arms and cushions for those with sitting and standing difficulties?
- Is there a hearing loop?
- Has the visibility of leaders been considered to maximise lip reading?
- Are large print service and hymn books and leaflets provided?
- Are service sheets and booklets in a dyslexia friendly format?
- Are projections as clear as they could be?
- Could liturgy and song words be provided in advance of the service?
- Can as wide a range of people as possible join together to receive Communion rather than disabled people being singled out or labelled by having to receive in the pew or in a different place?
- Can people with physical, cognitive or sensory disabilities take part by preaching, reading, serving, administering Communion, singing in the choir, leading intercessions, being on the welcome team etc?

(See the 360 Accessibility Audit Tool and the Quick Wins sheet downloadable from the Disability Ministry area of the London Diocese website for help to think practically and strategically about how your building and activities can be more accessible for disabled people)

<https://www.london.anglican.org/support/ministry-and-vocations/disability-ministry/downloadable-resources/>



However, even if you have been able to ensure that access and participation is possible in all of these ways, it is still possible for your worship to be exclusive rather than inclusive because of the language you use, the instructions you give and the physicality you demand from your congregation.

## 2. Sitting, standing and kneeling.

There are many reasons why people will struggle to adopt all or any of these postures during worship. Your pews may be uncomfortable or your chairs have no arms making sitting for prolonged periods or getting up from a seat difficult. Some people with back issues may find it much more comfortable to stand for much of the service rather than sit down. Many will not be able to kneel easily if at all and many will find standing for prolonged periods uncomfortable and painful. So, at any one time your congregation will have multiple needs. Although we can argue that adopting different postures or attitudes during a service adds to our personal and corporate worship, we must not let this become a discriminatory or exclusionary expectation. People must be given permission to adopt whatever posture is best for them and allows them to worship, with no hint that sitting while others stand or sitting or standing while others kneel etc diminishes a person's participation.

Universal instructions, sit, stand or kneel, are not appropriate, rather things like: 'You are welcome to stand at this point but please remain seated if this is more comfortable for you.' Or, 'Please feel free to kneel if you find this helpful or remain seated as we pray.'

It is helpful if an announcement is made at the start of each service such as: 'During the service we may at times suggest that you might sit or stand or kneel. However, please feel free to adopt whatever position is most comfortable for you. It is absolutely fine if you sit throughout the service, or if you stand or move around at any point. Please do whatever is best for you.'

Whether people can sit, stand and kneel with ease or have to stay seated or stand throughout, they should not be made to feel 'out of place' or diminished in any way because of what you say. The instructions you give must give people permission to be able to adopt whichever attitude is right for them as full participants in the act of worship.

Do not say 'please stand if you are able' as this immediately creates a negative, deficit distinction within the congregation of 'able' and 'disabled.' Instead, make sure that all announcements you make offer alternative postures in worship as a choice that all can make regardless of any other factors.

Instructions can also carry some ambiguity for people who are autistic or experience other forms of neurodivergence. Phrases like 'please take a seat' can easily be understood as an instruction to pick up a chair and take it somewhere else. 'Let's stand as we sing' can mean that no one should stand until the singing has started. And in many other ways it is easy to inadvertently create confusion and uncertainty for people. So, it is important to use clear, unambiguous language that gives people a choice about what they do.



Think about how the announcements you make might be interpreted by someone who thinks very literally. Find someone in your congregation who is autistic and ask them how they understand what you say.

### 3. Receiving Communion

Receiving Communion can be a contentious issue. Whether it is felt that this has to be at the Communion rail which involves negotiating the chancel steps. Whether there is an expectation to kneel etc. Many people, particularly the elderly, will struggle to receive as they have done in previous years long after this has in fact become difficult and even dangerous. What is important is to make the corporate physical act of receiving Communion as available and easy as possible to as many people as possible. Removing all steps and physical barriers and any expectation of kneeling and adopting the practice of all remaining standing (but not for a prolonged period) in a step free, wheelchair accessible area is by far the most accessible way of doing this.

If there are those in the congregation who cannot come forward to receive, it is far better to acknowledge their presence as part of the Body of Christ at that moment by taking Communion to them before others receive, rather than at the end of Communion when there is usually movement and noise around the Church.

### 4. Language in liturgy and hymns

We are often not critical enough of the language we use in worship. The words of the liturgy become very familiar which means we do not think about how words and phrases might be misunderstood. The words of many traditional hymns reflect a cultural setting and understanding from centuries past which is not always appropriate today. And many modern songs can use language in ambiguous ways or sacrifice clarity and meaning to rhyme and metre. More challenging maybe is the use of the language of disability as metaphor in scripture. This is particularly the language of blindness in both Old and New Testaments but many passages that also refer to being deaf, lame, having 'dulled minds' etc as being signs of spiritual poverty or inadequacy.

When planning a service, it is important to read and reflect on all the words that will be used – the liturgy, hymns and songs (all the verses), scripture and the sermon. Talk to disabled members of the congregation about how the language affects them and see how you can make things more inclusive.

Whenever you find the language of disability being used, think about what impact this might have and how it might be changed to be more inclusive and affirming of disabled people. Look for the language of disability – blind, deaf, lame etc, and ableist language – see, hear, speak, stand, walk run, etc, and explore how the language can be changed but the meaning preserved.

Sometimes we also find that the language of healing is used as metaphor or to convey expectation within songs and liturgy. 'Open our eyes (or ears),' 'you raise us up,' 'place our feet on solid ground,' 'you heal me of all my infirmities,' and many other ways in which physical healing is used as



a metaphor for spiritual healing and/or raising a sense of expectation of healing. These sorts of references can diminish disabled people both physically and spiritually. Most disabled people live fulfilled lives from within their experience of disability. They do not spend 24/7 longing for healing in order for their lives to become fulfilled. So, think about how you might modify this language to avoid stigmatising, othering or patronising disabled people.

(See appendix below for examples of how language can be modified to be more inclusive)

## 5. Preaching and leading.

Preachers and leaders should think about everything they are going to say, including announcements and notices. Long rambling and incoherent periods of notices are an ineffective way of conveying information to anyone but particularly confusing for those who process information in a way that requires clarity or for people with a hearing impairment. Whereas short, well planned notices can be appreciated by all. For many people, once you've lost their attention during the notices it is hard for them to refocus on anything else in the service.

Many more people than you are aware of will be relying on some lip-reading to follow what is said whether they have hearing loss or not. To maximise the potential for lip-reading, preachers and leaders need to keep still and not use excessive gestures or continually turn from side to side. Their faces need to be clearly visible and well lit. If a radio mic is used it should be a head or over-ear mic to minimise sound drop-out, particularly for the hearing loop. (But positioned so it does not obstruct the leaders lips for those relying on lipreading).

Having a visual map/time line/PowerPoint presentation for the sermon on a screen can be useful for some. However, remember that others cannot see this so it cannot become a vital part of the sermon. What you say must be fully understandable and accessible without the visuals.

Think carefully about the language you use and your use of metaphor and illustration. You may think that story is an ideal illustration of your point, but others may be puzzled about why you are talking about the day your car broke down in the middle of a sermon about the Good Samaritan. The man who was robbed didn't drive a car, did he?

## 6. Leaflets and printed material.

Remember that even if you use projections on a screen you still need to provide large print leaflets and booklets for those who cannot read the screen. It is important that the layout and print on these is as accessible as possible. People who are dyslexic will be more comfortable if you use cream or coloured paper in light pastel shades but different people will prefer different colours. Give people the opportunity to tell you what suits them best. The British Dyslexia Association have some excellent guidance on producing Dyslexia friendly printed material. See:

<https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk>



People with a range of eye conditions will also be more comfortable with coloured paper. Large print should be a minimum of 18 point font, some people though will need larger print, up to 24 point. Use a clear font such as Verdana.

Remember that some people will be reading and will need good lighting to do this. Reducing lighting to make the screen easier to read will disadvantage others.

It can be very helpful to a range of people if your liturgy and hymn/song words are available a day or so before the service. Blind people may need to convert these into Braille or an audio prompt. Others with autism or anxiety may be more comfortable if they can read the service beforehand. Anyone interpreting for a Deaf or deafblind person will benefit from being able to prepare beforehand. (In fact, interpreters would also benefit from having the sermon in advance as well).

Could you make the liturgy and hymn/song words available for download from your website 48 or 24 hours before the service?

## 7. Providing access information

It is important to provide good access information on your website. Not just whether you have step free access and an accessible toilet, but information about all the steps you take to make your worship accessible. See the information sheet 'Creating an accessibility area on your website' for information about how to do this.

It is also important to be honest when access and facilities are lacking. If you do not have step free access and an accessible toilet, be up front about it. If there are inaccessible parts of your building that others use regularly, make this clear. If you do not have a hearing loop, say so. It is far better that a disabled person has all the information they need to decide whether to attend a venue than to turn up and suffer the humiliation of being excluded once again.

## 8. Do an accessibility audit.

To really think through accessibility, belonging and participation, you will need to do an accessibility audit. The 360 Accessibility Audit tool that can be downloaded from the Diocese of London website is a self-audit tool that will help you ask the important questions.

You can find it at:

<https://www.london.anglican.org/support/ministry-and-vocations/disability-ministry/downloadable-resources/the-360-accessibility-audit/>

You will also find a 'Quick Wins' sheet which is packed with ideas to quickly and easily make changes that will improve access. Most churches can make substantial improvements for under £500 as these are often changes in procedure, admin and training rather than major building projects.



## 9. Help and support

Churches in the Diocese of London can contact the Diocesan Disability Ministry Enabler, Rev John Beauchamp, for help and support to explore how you can be more welcoming and accessible for disabled people. The views, opinions, perspectives, spiritual insights and theological understanding of disabled people is vital if you are going to become a community that is open to all. This is not about ministry 'to' disabled people but the ministry 'of' disabled people. Ministry that will enrich, transform and challenge the church to be more 'Christlike' and open to all. It is important to create opportunities for disabled and neurodivergent members of your congregation to be able to tell their stories and share their experiences. Organise a lunch with an open invitation to anyone who would like to share ideas about accessibility and form an access group who can help the PCC drive change. Appoint an 'Access Champion' to be the voice that constantly raises this issue across every aspect of the life and ministry of the church.

If you are not in the Diocese of London, your diocese may well have a disability advisor or equivalent who can offer advice and support.

### Appendix: Hymns, songs and liturgical examples

Below are a few examples of things to look out for in the hymns, songs and liturgy you use. Many of the changes will seem very small but can remove the barriers and sense of exclusion that ableist language so easily creates.

The hymn 'Amazing grace'

The words: I once was blind but now I see

Are much more inclusive as:

I once was bound but now I'm free

The Song 'There is a redeemer

The words: When I stand in glory, I will see his face,

And there I'll serve my King forever, in that holy place.

Are much more inclusive as:

When I am in glory, I will take my place

And there I'll serve my King forever, in his love and grace.

The hymn 'Abide with me'



The words: Change and decay in all around I see

Are much more inclusive as:

Change and decay in all around will be

The hymn 'All things bright and beautiful

The words: He gave us eyes to see them, And lips that we might tell

Are much more inclusive as:

He gave us hearts to thank him, and lives through which we tell

The hymn 'Fight the good fight

The words: Lift up thine eyes and seek His face;

Are much more inclusive as:

Lift up thy heart and seek his grace

The song 'From heaven you came (The servant king)

The words: Come see His hands and His feet,

Are much more inclusive as:

There on his hands and his feet

Hymn 'Glorious things of thee are spoken'

The words: See! The streams of living waters, Springing from eternal love,

Are much more inclusive as:

There The streams of living water, Springing from eternal love,

And: Round each habitation hovering, See the cloud and fire appear!

Are much more inclusive as:

Round each habitation hovering, as the cloud and fire appears!

Hymn 'Great is thy faithfulness'

The words: Morning by morning new mercies I see;

Are much more inclusive as:





New every morning your mercies will be

Liturgy

Here are a few examples of ablest language that we find in authorised liturgies

Our Lord Jesus Christ said:

The first commandment is this:

'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord.

Is more inclusive as:

Know, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord.

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to N.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

Is more inclusive as:

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to N.

The traditional responses:

Lord, in your mercy

**hear our prayer.**

**And:**

Lord, hear us.

**Lord, graciously hear us.**

Both assume that prayers are spoken. There are of course plenty of alternatives to use.

Alternative wording could be:

Lord, in your mercy

**Accept (or receive) our prayer.**

**And:**

Lord, bless our prayer;

**Lord, graciously bless us.**

Let your light shine before others,



so that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven. Matthew 5.16  
Is more inclusive as:  
so that they may know your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven.

From order 2C

Hear the words of comfort our Saviour Christ says to all who truly turn to him:

Hear what Saint Paul says:

Hear what Saint John says:

Are more inclusive as:

These are the words of comfort our Saviour Christ says to all who truly turn to him:

These are the words of Saint Paul

These are the words of Saint John

Eucharistic Prayers for Order 1

Eucharistic Prayers A and G

Through him, , and with him, and in him,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
with all who stand before you in earth and heaven,  
we worship you, Father almighty,  
in songs of everlasting praise:

Would be better as:

with all who acknowledge you in earth and heaven,  
we worship you, Father almighty,  
with lives of everlasting praise:

or

with all who live for you in earth and heaven,  
we worship you, Father almighty,  
with lives of everlasting praise:

Eucharistic Prayer A, B, c,

Therefore with angels and archangels,  
and with all the company of heaven,  
we proclaim your great and glorious name,  
for ever praising you and saying:

Is better as:



for ever praising you with joyful hearts:  
or

for ever praising your glorious name;

Eucharistic Prayer B

As we offer you this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving,  
we bring before you this bread and this cup  
and we thank you for counting us worthy  
to stand in your presence and serve you.

Is better as:

to come into your presence and serve you.

Eucharistic Prayer C

Hear us, merciful Father, we humbly pray,  
and grant that, by the power of your Holy Spirit,  
we receiving these gifts of your creation, this bread and this wine,

Is better as:

Bless us, merciful Father, we humbly pray,

Or

Come to us merciful Father, we humbly pray,

Eucharistic Prayer E

And so we gladly thank you,  
with saints and angels praising you, and saying:

Is better as:

And so we gladly thank you,  
As with saints and angels praising you, we proclaim:

Eucharistic Prayer F



Look with favour on your people  
and in your mercy hear the cry of our hearts.

Is better as:

and in your mercy accept the cry of our hearts.

Or

and in your mercy receive the cry of our hearts.

Eucharistic Prayer E

Lord of all life,  
help us to work together for that day  
when your kingdom comes  
and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth.

Is better as:

and justice and mercy will fill the earth.

Or

and justice and mercy will be manifest in all the earth.

Eucharistic Prayer F

As we watch for the signs of your kingdom on earth,  
we echo the song of the angels in heaven,  
evermore praising you and saying:

Is better as:

As we rejoice in the signs of your kingdom on earth,  
we echo the praise of the angels in heaven,  
evermore praising you and proclaiming:

Eucharistic Prayer G

You give us breath and speech, that with angels and archangels  
and all the powers of heaven  
we may find a voice to sing your praise:

Is better as:

You give us the breath of life, that with angels and archangels



and all the powers of heaven  
we may live to proclaim your praise: