



Strength made perfect

Disability and the church

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## **Session 1: What is disability?**

Participant's handout

### **Welcome and introductions**

If you are in a small group, spend some time introducing yourselves and sharing what you hope to get out of these sessions.

### **Introduction**

This series of studies will help you begin to think about disability and the church. We will explore the social context of disability, what the Bible tells us about disability and disabled people, and then think about what the church might do today to be a place of equal belonging and participation for all.

Each session contains two or three reflections with a number of questions and a moment to hold all you have heard and shared before God. It is important in your discussions (if you are in a small group) that you make time and space for everyone to be heard. The stories, experiences and reflections of any group members who are disabled will be particularly valuable to the group.

These studies will hopefully cause you to begin to think in new ways, but it will not make you into a more open and accessible church. That is a far deeper process that you will need to commit yourself to over an extended period of time. But, as you hear of the injustice that disabled people experience and the church's failure to be truly open to all, along with the Gospel imperative to bring the marginalised into the centre, I hope you will be inspired to seek to become a church that recognises and lives out the truth that God's power is made perfect in weakness and that in God's kingdom, disability is a witness of grace that is essential to the Body of Christ.

## **Disability today**

Listen to the recording of this section or read the text from the leader's guide.

'Many people who regard themselves as not disabled say they are concerned, or even fearful, about meeting disabled people. In fact, 67% (more than 2 out of 3 people) say they are 'uncomfortable' about meeting disabled people.'

### Reflection and discussion

If you think you are not disabled, imagine for a moment that you are asked to accompany a disabled person on a journey. What would you think? What would you be worried about?

If you are disabled, think about how you feel when meeting strangers for the first time. What worries you and why? Maybe you have had good and bad experiences with other people.

Take some time to share your thoughts and experiences

## **What is disability?**

Listen to the recording of this section or read the text in the leader's guide.

'Mahatma Gandhi is supposed to have said: "The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members." If this is true, then the statistics and the experiences of disabled people in the UK today suggest that our society does not measure up well. Statistics and research reveal that as a nation we are not inclusive or compassionate towards many people who live with disabilities. Our achievement driven, wealth measured society does not value those who cannot take part in the race towards what is judged to be success. Disabled people are pushed to the margins of society, categorised, and denied the opportunities that those who fit society's definition of 'normal' enjoy as a matter of course.'

### Questions

1. How does this make you feel?
2. If you are not disabled, have you ever thought that disability brings so much disadvantage and lack of opportunity?
3. If you are disabled, are you able to talk about the disadvantage you have experienced and how this has made you feel?

## **Models of disability**

Listen to the recording of this section or read the text in the leader's guide.

The Medical Model – Disability is a medical problem and requires the cure or correction of physical or cognitive abnormalities so people can live as full a lives as possible.

The Social Model – Impairments are not the cause of disability. Rather people are 'disabled' when society does not allow them to live full lives with their impairments.

The Minority Model – The experience of disability puts people into a minority group with its own culture and story. This should be respected and valued.

'In all of these models, disability is a negative categorisation that indicates that a person has some sort of deficit. Something is missing or not right about them. Or in other words, something has gone wrong. The question this course asks is: Is this right? Is disability something gone wrong, or is there something much more important here. Something that can tell us incredible things about God and creation and our place in all of this.

### **Questions**

1. Has looking at disability from a social model perspective changed your understanding of what disability is?
2. Do you find it surprising that many disabled people would not want to endure lengthy medical treatment in the hope of 'curing' or 'normalising' their body but would rather be allowed to live a full life as a disabled person?
3. What do you think are the barriers and attitudes society presents that cause 'disability,' excluding and inhibiting people whose bodies, senses and minds do not conform to what is called 'normal' from playing a full part in society?

### **Time to reflect**

#### **Psalm 8**

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory  
above the heavens.

From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies,  
to silence the foe and the avenger.

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars,  
which you have set in place.

What are we that you are mindful of us,  
our children that you care for them?  
You made us a little lower than the heavenly beings  
and crowned us with glory and honour.  
You made us rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under our feet:  
all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas.  
O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

At the centre of this Psalm, in verses 4 and 5, we read that God is mindful of us and cares for us, and we have been crowned with glory and honour. There is no caveat to this revelation. It does not say, 'you are mindful of some of us and care about some of us and crown some of us with glory and honour but some of us remain outside of this blessing.' No, it simply says that all human beings, all children born to human parents, are held in the mind of God who cares for us and honours us and crowns us with glory. And this is true no matter who we are and no matter how we are embodied. We don't need to be a particular physical shape. We don't need to understand. We don't need to do anything. But God is mindful of all of us. He cares for all of us. He has crowned each of us with glory and honour. And that must mean that disabilities are equally a revelation of God's glory as are abilities. It must mean that the child with profound intellectual disabilities is equally able to bring God into our midst as is the eloquent preacher or spirit filled worship leader. It must mean that every disabled person, alongside every person who regards themselves as not disabled, has a contribution to make to the revelation of God's glory in his church.

The problem is that the church has lost sight of this truth. It has lost sight of this truth and been distracted by the secular view that disability is deficit, something missing, a negative experience. The unique opportunity that we have in the church though is to model a new understanding. To show the world something that is truly counter-cultural and prophetic. Prophetic of the kingdom banquet that is to come where all people, disabled and non-disabled, gather around the table in the presence of the God who crowns us with glory and honour and through our abilities and disabilities is fully revealed amongst us. In these sessions we will explore something of what this might mean for us as individuals and for the church.

Read the psalm again and see if it comes to life in a new way for you. Then spend some time in silence before you share your thoughts

Pray