

## **17 October 2015: Living On the Edge - Day Conference on Disability and Church**

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It felt like a watershed moment, a new chapter in the disabled Christian movement. Sixty delegates, the majority with lived experience of disability. Twelve speakers, each with their own perspective on disability and the Christian churches, along with the input of a noted theologian. A communion service that made space for meditation and reflection. An art space, a silent space, and multi-sensory prayer stations which allowed people to engage with the themes of the conference in practical ways. A chance for disabled Christians from across the country to gather, network, support each other, and build on the work that many were doing in their churches and communities. This was the 'Living on the Edge' conference on disability and church, the fourth such annual conference, organised through a partnership between St Martin-in-the-Fields and Inclusive Church.

Fiona MacMillan from St Martin-in-the-Fields introduced the event. As she put it, this was a day *by* and *for* disabled people, rather than *about* them. That's what really set this event apart from other events on disability and church, which sometimes just discuss disabled Christians, rather than really involving us. The theme of the day was 'Living on the Edge'. The question "How do we respond when we find ourselves excluded?" was answered throughout the conference, illustrated with short, five-to-ten-minute presentations by people creating change. All the speakers showed us how they have used their experience of exclusion positively and creatively to speak to the Church on issues of disability exclusion, either as individuals or as representatives of groups.

The range of speakers was impressive. Sam Wells, vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, opened the conference with a theological reflection that represented disability as story and mystery, rather than a problem that needs 'fixing'. He told the touching tale of a disabled man who was easily overlooked because he didn't fit the norms of society or of the Church, but who had a powerful ministry in weaving new rugs from old rags. Can we, asked Sam, 'over-accept' disability by practicing radical acceptance? Such an approach would be a complete contrast to the exclusion that has been experienced by many disabled people in the churches. It was a powerful call to action with which to begin the day.

We then heard from various groups doing interesting work with, among and by disabled people in the churches. Fiona was joined by Ali Lyon and Mims Hodson to talk about the Disability Advisory Group at St Martin's. The DAG brings together people with insight and experience of disability to identify and address barriers to belonging, and to enrich the church and community. Fiona explained "We're trying to weave our experience in rather than adding it on top." Bernice Hardie and Celia Webster told the story of how they felt called to set up WAVE (We're All Valued Equally), a church project for people with learning disabilities that approaches church in new, more accessible ways. "If Jesus came back today," they pondered, "might he ask why our churches aren't filled with people with learning disabilities?" We were also joined by three members of the user-led group Disability and Jesus: Katie Tupling, Bill Braviner and David Lucas (accompanied by guide dog

Jarvis). They spoke about their work on new theologies of disability. Katie wondered whether she would need to be healed in heaven. “Maybe I’ll still have crutches in heaven,” she said, challenging mainstream church theologies of healing. “And maybe that will be OK.”

We were also honoured to hear from some eminent individuals working for change in the churches: Ann Memmott, a national autism advisor, who has produced some wonderful resources to help churches to better include autistic members; Tim Goode, who uses his lived experience of impairment to inform his role as Diocesan Disability Adviser for Southwark Diocese; Richard Tillman, who spoke about his journey with addiction; Eva McIntyre from Mental Health Matters, the Church of England group addressing issues of mental health; and Susan Wolfe, a social historian, who spoke about activism. I shared some of the research that I’ve been doing with disabled Christians.

It was wonderful to have alternative spaces available, too, so that we could engage with the themes of the conference in different ways. In the art space we created a huge altar cloth based on the conference image of the edge of a forest, making visual and tactile representations of ourselves and placing them to illustrate where we are living on the edge. We shared the cloth in the communion service, which took a more meditative, less ‘wordy’ approach to church liturgy. Small discussion groups allowed us to talk about the themes of the conference with others, while the silent space allowed people to reflect in quiet.



Photo: People sit around the edges of the church hall for a contemplative communion service at the conference, led by Jonathan Evens and June Boyce Tillman. Photo by Disability and Jesus.

Between the talks, meditations were led by event chaplain Katherine Hedderly, which enabled us to reflect throughout the full day, and Bob Callaghan led question-and-answer sessions. Meanwhile, in the Marketplace, speakers shared more about their work with delegates, which allowed us to answer questions individually.

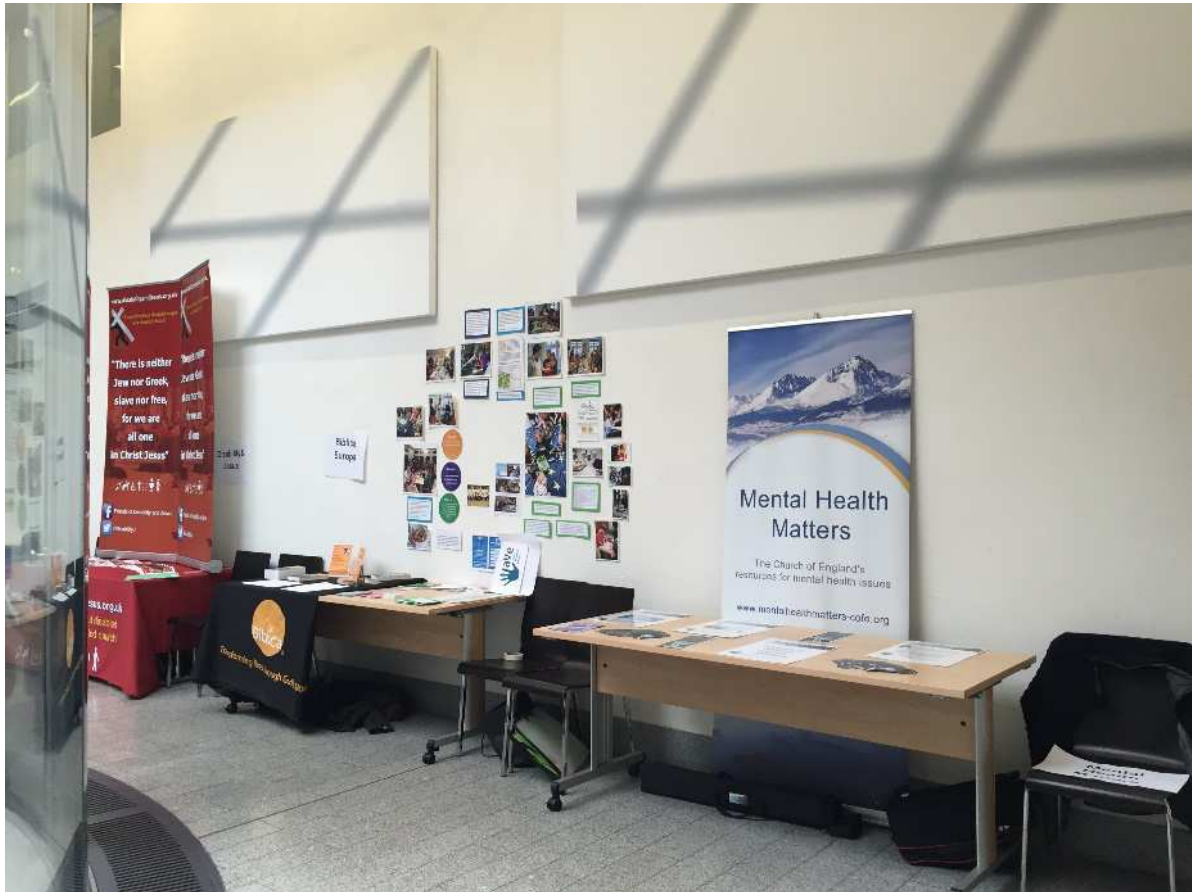


Photo: displays from presenters in the marketplace. The stalls in the picture (right to left): Disability and Jesus; WAVE; Mental Health Matters. Photo by Naomi Jacobs.

Throughout the conference we were mindful of the recent sad death of John Hull, a disability theologian and keynote speaker at previous conferences. He had a concept of disabled people as prophetic for the church. In our discussion groups we talked about this concept, and I thought of the different ways that the concept of ‘prophecy’ could be related to disabled people. In the past, disabled people were sometimes considered somehow closer to God by virtue of simply being disabled – but that can be dehumanising. On the other hand, when John Hull spoke of disabled people as having a prophetic function for Christ’s church, he was in part referring to the ways in which we can challenge the church.

We spent Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> October challenging the church’s concepts of friendship, welcome, communication, accessibility, disability health – and even life, death and what it means to be human. And that, I think many people might agree, is truly prophetic. I look forward to many more such challenging, prophetic conferences in the future

Special thanks for such a wonderful day to the team who planned the conference: Fiona MacMillan, Bob Callaghan, Jonathan Evens, Mims Hodson, Naomi Jacobs, June Boyce Tillman and Alex Gowing Cumber. Thanks also to the Trustees of Inclusive Church, and to the clergy, staff and community of St Martin-in-the-Fields for hosting, supporting and working as volunteers on the day. And thanks to the delegates, who came from as far away as Durham and Southampton, to inform, encourage and inspire one another and the church;