

UNCOVERING THE ROOF: Research about disability and Christian churches in the UK

Author: Naomi Jacobs

SOAS, University of London, Department of the Study of Religions

WHAT & WHY?



35 interviews with disabled Christians.
Looking at 3 church projects with disabled people.
Attempting to follow principles of *emancipatory research*.

Emancipatory Research?

In the past, disabled people have said that they felt research took advantage of them and didn't give anything back. Emancipatory research tries to give the balance of power back to the people who take part in the research. In this research project:

- By asking participants what they think should be researched
- By paying participants for their time (individual interviews) or contributing to the projects being observed (financially or practically)
- By showing people what is going to be said about them in the research
- By having a group of disabled people (Christians) advising the researcher during the project

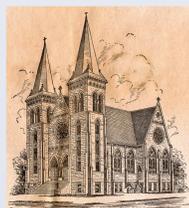
What else do you think researchers should do to give power over disability research back to disabled people?

HOW & WHO?

THE INTERVIEWS

The Cathedral-Goer: Brianna
Wheelchair user with MS. Attends a cathedral.

- Deals with poor facilities every week – no parking, parts of cathedral not accessible, services held in inaccessible areas
- Has pushed for change towards disabled people and felt ignored
- Visiting wheelchair users are asked to book in advance to attend services at the cathedral. This may be against the Equality Act.



The Charismatic Couple: Wayne & Hazel
Both blind. Attend charismatic Baptist church.

- Their church is very large & they feel overlooked
- Have been discouraged from getting involved in leadership roles at the church
- When they go up for healing, it is assumed they want healing from blindness. This confuses them!
- Event booking systems and facilities can be inaccessible
- Songs/readings not made accessible in different formats



The Former Anglican: Anthony
Autistic. Once considered becoming a vicar.

- No longer attends church. Thinks there is too much pressure for autistic people to get involved at a level they are not comfortable with.
- Becomes stressed in church when has to control autistic behaviour
- Became mistrustful of Christians after discrimination



CHURCH PROJECTS (CASE STUDIES)

This stage of the research is not yet complete, but includes three main projects:



The Church Group for People with Learning Difficulties

A monthly Sunday afternoon church group. They engage members in lots of ways – simple songs, drama, video, creative activities and very short talks. Members help run services, with music, drama and other activities. There's always tea and cake!

The User-Led Disability Advisory Group

A group of disabled people from a central London church. They meet to discuss ways to impact the whole church on issues of disability. They are organising training, events, an annual conference and Sunday services, among other things. They want the church to see disability as a central issue to consider all the time, rather than an occasional add-on.



The Informal Church Café

A London suburb church's informal café has organically become a place that disabled people attend regularly.

WHAT HAVE WE FOUND?

Almost every disabled person I spoke to has difficulties going to church because they are disabled. For some, their needs are overlooked. Some are afraid to ask for what they need. Some struggle with access or lack of provision (e.g. no Braille, no subtitled videos).

Finding the Right Place: the importance to many people of finding a church where they feel valued and where their gifts are used – and they are fully included *as they are*.

Growth or community support? Churches that focus on getting bigger and bigger may exclude people. It's hard to get to know people's needs if a church is very big.

Difficulties Entering Leadership. Many of the participants are able to be involved in their churches as members, but meet barriers if they want to be ordained or involved as leaders. **Disabled people are seen as needing care** – but they have their own ministry.

In need of particular support and facilities – people with learning difficulties, some autistic people, people with dementia, and those with complex and severe needs. Churches need to learn more about how to include these people and use their gifts.

Social barriers. A lot of people found tea and coffee hour difficult – it can be noisy, disorganized, and not very accessible. It can be confusing or stressful. Some people were discouraged from joining groups, or could not come to inaccessible social events.

'But we've always done it like this': church culture. Lots of disabled people can't manage large services or early Sunday morning starts. Some mobility-restricted people want to receive communion differently from the way the vicar wants to give it. Some deaf people would like to pray with their eyes open but feel judged by others. These are just some of the ways that **church culture can exclude people who are different**.

What about justice? Some people said the church isn't aware of all the struggles people have just to make it to the church door, including **poverty** and transport issues. **Should the church be campaigning, rather than simply 'caring'?**

Different ways of thinking about disability and God: Disabled people are not all the same. (Sounds obvious, but it isn't to everyone!) There is no 'one way' that disabled people think about subjects like healing. **Can churches make room for different views?**

Churches often talk about 'friendship'. It's a good start, but not the only thing. Participants in this study often had **practical needs** that were not being met in their churches.

EASY-READ VERSION



Naomi talked to disabled people and people with learning difficulties. She asked them about going to church.



She looked at three church projects. The projects were for disabled people.



Naomi paid the disabled people for taking part.



She asked them what they wanted her to know about church.

Lots of people took part. Here is what a few people said.



Brianna goes to a cathedral. She goes in a wheelchair. It is hard for her to get in.

Wayne and Hazel are blind. Their church is very big. They sometimes feel forgotten.



Anthony is autistic. He used to go to an Anglican church. He finds church stressful.

Naomi looked at three church projects too.



There was a church for people with learning difficulties.



There was a group of disabled people who wanted to help their church.



There was a church café where some disabled people go.

What Naomi has found out



Some parts of church can be very hard for disabled people.



Some people want to help to lead the church. They want to get involved.



Some people don't want churches to get too big. They might get left out.



Some people need extra help. Churches should provide this.



Everyone is different. People think about God and church in different ways.



Disabled people want to be included. Including people means more than just being friends with them. It also means making sure they can take part.