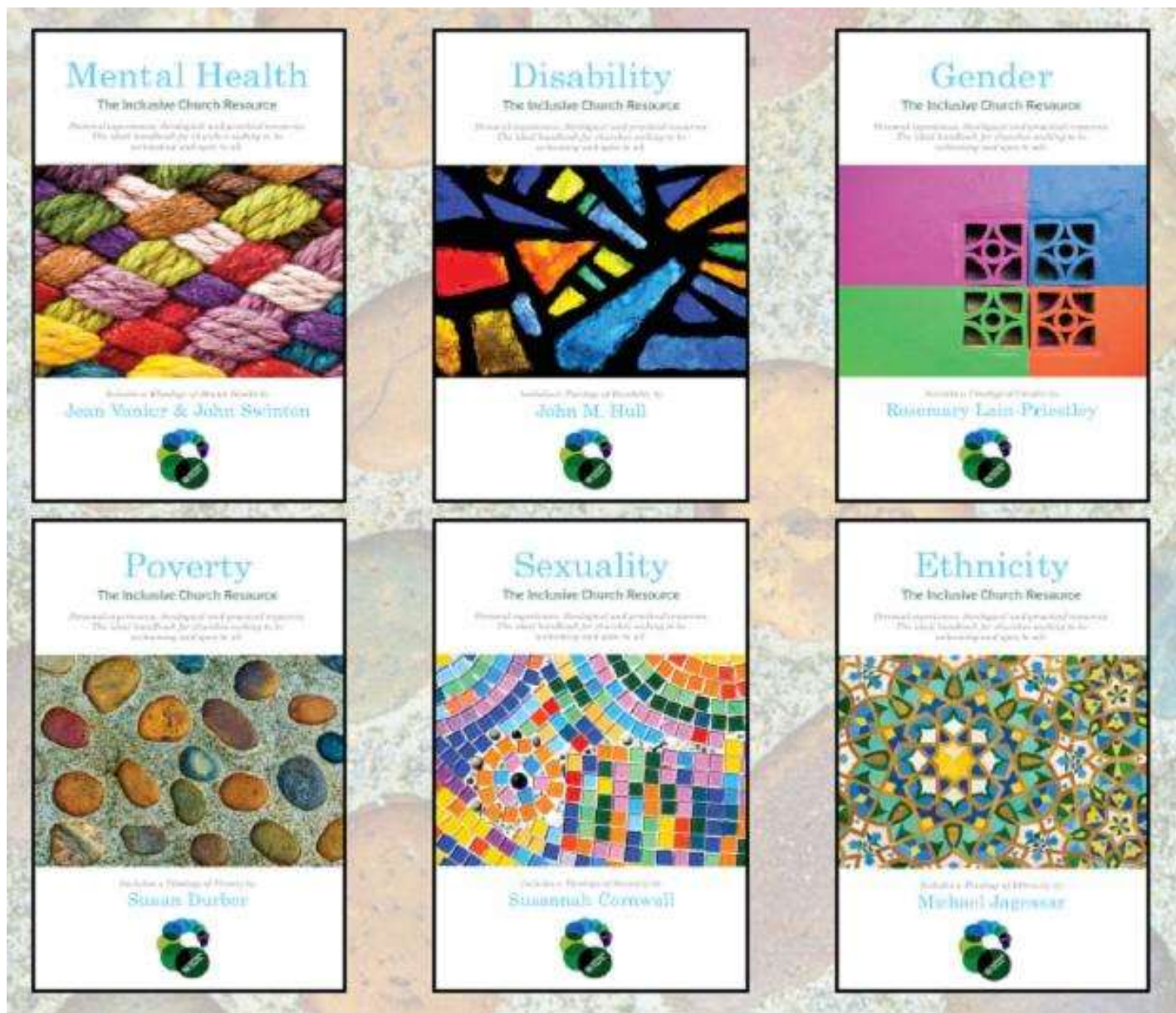




# Inclusive Church Small Group Study Resources: Disability



**DARTON · LONGMAN + TODD** *The Jerusalem Trust*

# Small Group Study Resources



## Outline & Acknowledgements

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### Outline

The Inclusive Church Resource series is published by Darton, Longman & Todd. The series comprises 6 titles: Disability, Mental Health, Gender, Poverty, Sexuality and Ethnicity.

Each book contains stories from lived experience, a theological reflection and resources for further information. We recommend that each church/group using these study resources obtains a set of the Resource Books.

These small group study resources provide additional material to supplement the books. They have emerged as a result of churches using the books creatively for small group study. These study resources can be used in any order. Each study guide contains the outline, introduction, protocols, and liturgies, as well as the core study material

### Acknowledgments

Inclusive Church is grateful to the generosity of the Jerusalem Trust for a grant that has enabled these materials to be drawn together. This grant was match-funded by Inclusive Church supporters and members.

Inclusive Church would like to express its gratitude to Darton, Longman & Todd for its continued support of the Inclusive Church Resource Series.

The material has been written and compiled by Jeremy Pemberton.

Jeremy has been a priest of the Church of England for thirty-four years. He has worked in parishes in the North and East of England, as a Mission partner in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in theological education. Latterly, he has been Senior Chaplain and Bereavement Services Manager for a large NHS Trust in Lincolnshire. He now works as a cathedral lay clerk, a civil celebrant and a consultant specialising in spiritual care and equality and diversity relating to sexuality and religion. He is married to Laurence Cunningham, and they live in Southwell.

# Small Group Study Resources

## Introduction & Protocols

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### Introduction

These study materials are designed for use by a group of up to twelve or so people. If you have more people who want to use them, we recommend that you split into two groups.

Each session is designed to last for an hour and a half - but you can shorten or extend that as you choose.

The sessions have deliberately been designed to be very simple. They do not require extensive preparation by "leaders"; anyone can lead each session. It can be shared by two people if that helps, with different people leading different sections.

### The aim of the material is:

- to provide enough material on each topic to stimulate people's thinking
- to structure the time so that everyone has a chance to speak and express themselves
- to link to Bible material that may be helpful in considering each topic
- to encourage reflection on how the group/church may better include the subject of the study
- to frame the time with prayers that can be led by anyone

### To use these materials with a group you will need:

- A place to meet and enough chairs or cushions for everyone to sit comfortably
- A candle which is lit at the beginning of each meeting and extinguished at the end (this is not essential - if you don't have one it doesn't matter)
- Copies of the opening/closing liturgy for people to share in. In addition to being included in the study material, the liturgies have also been included as separate pages at the end of the study material for ease of printing.

- Bibles for everyone (or printed off copies of the Bible resource passages for each session)
- And that is it!

**These are the skills that the person/people leading needs:**

- Confidence to be able to draw the group together and help people find their way through the material
- An eye to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak and be heard
- The ability to discourage those who talk too much and encourage those who are reticent
- The ability to keep an eye on the clock and to work out roughly how to move from section to section so that you finish on time

If someone would like to try leading but has not done so before, why not let them try sharing the leadership that week with someone more experienced.

It should be noted that, as with all group work of this kind, there are no right answers. This is not about finding answers, it is about expanding our thinking, and listening for God's voice. We support one another in a group and hope that we can learn to be better disciples together. When we approach sessions prayerfully and thoughtfully, ready to learn, then we find that we are surprised by the new things that we discover working together.

Please remember too, that not everyone may be very comfortable doing lots of reading silently or aloud. You may need to find some people in your group who would be happy to read some of the materials aloud to the group, so that everyone can participate equally having listened to the material under discussion. Be careful of asking someone in front of the group if they would read aloud. Better to ask for volunteers.

Sessions include links to short YouTube videos. These can really make an impact if you have access to a computer and the internet so that you can play them to the group. If you have the capacity to link up to a TV or a larger screen that is very helpful, but even playing them on a laptop is very helpful. But the sessions work without them; they are not essential.

In particular, we hope these sessions can make us long for God's church to become a place of greater awareness and greater action towards including everyone. If they help us notice where people have been invisible, or where

their gifts have lain unused because they did not fit a particular mould, or where their needs have been ignored, then they will have fulfilled their purpose.

*Jeremy Pemberton*

## **Group Protocols**

You will need to agree these at the start of the first session. Some people like to write these up and display them so that they are there for future reference. The best way to get a group to agree to protocols is to ask them to devise them themselves. Here are some suggestions of the kinds of things that you might like to consider including:

- Commitment to meeting - groups work best when everyone agrees to come to the sessions
- Commitment to participating - groups also work best when everyone there contributes
- Not interrupting or speaking over people - it helps everyone participate if their contributions are listened to by all
- No side conversations - people agree not to have whispered conversations with their neighbour while others are talking
- Confidentiality - what is said in the group stays in the group. We want people to feel safe. Some people will never have disclosed anything personal in a group before; confidentiality helps them feel safe
- Consideration in speaking - people who are confident about speaking in groups should not hog the time by talking too much
- Respecting people - there may be many different views expressed. It helps our learning if we don't rush to judgement.
- Gentleness in challenge - if someone says something we disagree with, then we agree to find a way of expressing that without aggression. "I don't see it quite that way...", "I look at that differently...", "I wonder if you have thought about..." can all be ways to do this
- Keeping to time - a group that always overruns can be off-putting for people who have to get home, catch a bus, get to something else etc. Good time-keeping is important in maintaining group loyalty
- Praying for each other - a group whose members commit to praying for each other through the week quickly builds a sense of group solidarity and care

# Small Group Study Resources

## Disability

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### **1. The welcome**

Welcome everyone to the venue. If you are offering refreshments, then the beginning of the meeting is a good place to do so. When everyone has settled you can begin. Timings against the different sections are only suggestions.

### **2. The Opening Liturgy (3 minutes)**

In addition to being included here, the opening and closing liturgies have been included as separate pages at the end of the study material for ease of printing.

Use the opening liturgy to start your meeting. You will have decided whether or not you wish to light a candle, and if so, have that ready.

[One voice leads the liturgy. The parts in bold are for everyone to say together. Don't be afraid to hold the opening silence for a minute or two.]

*A candle is lit.*

May the light and peace of Jesus Christ  
be with you.

**May the divine Presence bless you.**

*We say together:*

**In silence we come to God.  
We lay aside the burdens of the day,  
the demands of others,  
and our own preoccupations;  
we ask forgiveness for our sins and omissions;  
we long for God, and we listen:-**

*We keep silence*

Come to us, liberating Love,  
forgive us and free us to hear your life-giving voice.



Send your Spirit to lead us into all truth,  
for the sake of your wonderful name. **Amen.**

*(We say together a version of the Lord's Prayer)*

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your Kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,  
as we forgive those who sin  
against us.  
Lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom,  
the power and the glory are  
yours.  
Now and for ever.  
Amen.**

**Our Father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass  
against us,  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, the  
power, and the glory,  
for ever and ever. Amen.**

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**

### **3. What is a disability? (10 minutes)**

What do you see as disability? Perhaps our definitions and understanding of disability need to broaden.

Sometimes life is harder for disabled people because or partly because the society we live in is not set up for disabled people. Some would say that this is an example of how society disables people, as well as or rather than the condition. Understanding disability this way round is called the 'social model of disability'. Under UK law, a disability is anything which affects your life adversely and long-term. Under the government's definition, disability does not only include physical conditions like cerebral palsy or spina bifida, or learning disabilities like Down's Syndrome, but also includes neurodivergent conditions like ADHD and autism, and also pain conditions like chronic migraine and long-term mental health conditions like recurrent depression and bipolar disorder.

Are you surprised by these definitions?

### **4. The experience of disability (30 minutes)**

If you are able, look at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CL8GMxRW\\_5Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CL8GMxRW_5Y)

This short film, "Talk to Me" is about Phoebe, an 11 year girl, and has been made to increase awareness of physical disability.

These short extracts from the Inclusive Church Resource give a flavour of how three different people experience their own disability in society and/or church. Read them aloud and then consider the questions below.

**Susan** is an American in London who lives with epilepsy.

"My biggest problem with epilepsy is other people. I don't lose consciousness. I don't need medical attention when having a seizure. My arms jerk and my head jerks and my voice gets louder and sometimes I bark like a seal. I look weird.

People seem to think I can control what is happening to me. They often shout in my face or make fun of me. I've been dragged out of a building and thrown onto the street by the security guard to whom I went for help in finding a quiet place to sit. I didn't fit the only type of seizure he knew about. My seizures make other people uncomfortable. The type of seizures I have are triggered by particular sounds."

Susan helped as a volunteer in a large organisation. She was no cook, but put cheese on crackers for the food at an annual festival. When her seizures started she was told the next year that it might be best if she did not come to the festival lest the music trigger a seizure.

"My ability to put cheese on a cracker in a kitchen full of laughter was not affected by the onset of epilepsy. But this is how we are marginalised - one cracker at a time."

**Fiona** was affected by viral illness and now struggles with a variety of symptoms. She is a wheelchair user:

"My illness affects the physical and the cognitive and the sensory, gives me pain and spasms and fatigue and problems with mobility. It changes all the time, which is why no one really understands or keeps up with it - not my family nor my friends nor my doctor nor indeed myself - and that is hugely disabling in itself...I still struggle with the language of disability so I'm not surprised that others do too."

"Nowadays I am more comfortable with broken people, with those whose minds or bodies have been disrupted, distorted; who no longer see themselves as in charge or invulnerable. Invulnerable people are foreign to me, exhausting to be around because my attention slides off their smooth surfaces and has nowhere to rest. But broken people can be jagged yet have a gentle core of compassion, we have an unspoken recognition of our shared otherness. The light shines through the broken places in the most amazing ways."



**Ben** has dyspraxia and autism. He is an ordained minister in the Church of England

"Dyspraxia affects the way that your brain and body talk to each other, the normal connections are distorted. I lack proprioception, the sense of where different parts of my body are in relation to each other, making me clumsy and uncoordinated. My other senses are affected...particularly my sense of hearing...in crowded or noisy environments I struggle to pick out a particular 'thread' of speech or noise. Dyspraxia affects the way that memories are formed.

I am at the milder end of the (autism) spectrum. But combined with...my dyspraxia...I find it difficult to communicate with people face to face. My autistic tendencies mean that I can easily suffer from 'sensory overload' is exposed to too many sensory elements all at once. I am often brutally and inappropriately honest. I get impatient and frustrated with people...

I have strong coping strategies in place to keep the effects of my disabilities to a minimum: I practice facial expressions...I practice my tone of voice....I read books on body language; I use relaxation strategies to reduce my anxiety and frustration...and I try really hard not to be too honest or talk too much about the things that excite me.

I grew up in a Christian family...I have a Christian wife, I take my two young children to church every Sunday, I am training to be a vicar myself, but I still feel uncomfortable attending church as a dyspraxic, autistic Christian."

How do you respond to these voices and stories? Note together your reactions; where you are touched, where you find their testimony challenging or where it makes you uncomfortable. Talk together about what you notice. What are they trying to tell us? What are the things that we could do that would make a difference?

### **5. Theology and disability (35 minutes)**

Professor John Hull, who died in 2015, wrote extensively about theology and disability, in particular his own experience of blindness. In the Disability book in the Inclusive Church Series he has this to say about the changes in attitudes to disabled people:

"In general, the terminology has become more tolerant and accepting. People who could not walk used to be called cripples; today it has become more usual to describe such folk as being physically disabled. People who today would be called severely intellectually disabled used to be described as being feeble-minded, retarded, morons, imbeciles or idiots. Interesting distinctions can be made between the words 'impairment', 'disability' and 'handicap'. Impairment is often regarded as a neutral expression, simply indicating that some aspect of a person's mental or physical life is not functioning well."

Hull sees disability theology as a genre of theological thinking like black theology or feminist theology, a theology from the margins. "It seeks to champion the needs of disabled people, and to expose the ways in which the Christian faith itself or the Bible may create negative attitudes towards disabled people".

Think about light and darkness in the Bible. How does this contrast usually work? God is more usually considered to be the God of Light, with darkness inferring evil. (John 1:4-5; John 3:19)

What about blindness? This is often a metaphor for sinfulness. But see John 9 and the story of the man born blind.

However, there are also positive references to not being able to see 2 Corinthians 5:7 '... for we walk by faith, not by sight' and 2 Chronicles 6:1 'The Lord has said that he would reside in thick darkness.'

Are there other ways that the Bible can support us in developing a theology of disability that includes rather than excludes?

Hull also says, "...thoughts about God lead us on to consider the creation, avoiding an overemphasis on perfection other than in a context of diversity while the pressure to be normal can make us shrink from making friends with those who seem to us to be abnormal. And describes Jesus as 'the disabled God', (Nancy Eiesland, 1994) whose scars and wounds after his resurrection alleviate the idea of an almost inhuman perfection."

How do we think of God? Is the perfection of the Divine altered at all by the wounded Jesus, whose body still bears scars even after the Resurrection? Do we feel under pressure to be normal, in whatever form that takes?

John Hull states, "There is not so much a question of including disabled people in the church; it is rather a matter of the normal church learning how to welcome those who appear to be different..." and "The church will become more truly a symbol of the Kingdom of God when it becomes more faithfully a community of inclusive love."

How can we slow down enough to listen to what people who are different are saying to us?

What do we need to be attending to if we are to be an inclusive church for people with disabilities of various kinds?

## ***6. Silence and the Closing Liturgy (7 minutes)***

Draw your discussions to a close and allow yourselves to fall silent for several minutes. Ask God to speak to you through what you have heard.

Then use the closing liturgy to end your meeting.

## **Closing Liturgy**

We bring before God all we have heard,  
Our thinking and speaking,  
Those about whom we have talked,  
The things that have challenged us,  
And the ways in which we have heard the still small voice of the Divine:

*(short pause for silent reflection)*

Grant us, loving Father,  
grace to entrust to you  
all that we have done.  
Send your Spirit  
to stir up in us  
a passion for justice  
a longing for equity  
and a determination to include all.  
For the sake of Jesus our Saviour.  
**Amen.**

God our Lover,  
Whose son Jesus Christ wept  
at the brokenness of the world;

Look with compassion on our frailties,  
open our hearts and hands to one another,  
our ears to listen and our eyes to see.

Give us grace to learn what it is to honour the dignity of all,  
and to be blessed by the ministry of those the world overlooks;

in the name of the ever-wounded risen Saviour. **Amen.**

*After this the candle is extinguished. Then the meeting may close with one or other of these prayers*

**The grace of our Lord Jesus  
Christ,  
and the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy  
Spirit  
be with us all, evermore. Amen.**

In our hearts and homes the love of  
God,  
**in our coming and going the  
peace of God,**  
in our life and believing the strength  
of God,  
**at our end and beginning the  
welcome of God.**

# Small Group Study Resources

## Opening and Closing Liturgy

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### *The Opening Liturgy*

[One voice leads the liturgy. The parts in bold are for everyone to say together. Don't be afraid to hold the opening silence for a minute or two.]

*A candle is lit.*

May the light and peace of Jesus Christ  
be with you.

**May the divine Presence bless you.**

*We say together:*

**In silence we come to God.  
We lay aside the burdens of the day,  
the demands of others,  
and our own preoccupations;  
we ask forgiveness for our sins and omissions;  
we long for God, and we listen:-**

*We keep silence*

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*(We say together a version of the Lord's Prayer)*

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hallowed be your name.  
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**For the kingdom,  
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yours.  
Now and for ever.  
Amen.**

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power, and the glory,  
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**And also with you.**

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